

eternal wind

s. zhemaitis



mir publishers





SERGEI ZHEMAITIS

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TO THE READER

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A FAREWELL EVENING

Below lay the great city. The Moscow River glided smoothly, shirred into graceful loops by delicately arched bridges. The Kremlin's cupolas were touched with rose by the rays of the setting sun. And the clusters of buildings, scattered among the trees in apparent disorder, looked like an island archipelago in a green sea. Like grey stalagmites rose the ancient skyscrapers, cold and solitary. We were standing just under the roof of their forerunner—the university building on the Lenin Hills. A tall building, rising in steps, it did not seem cold and solitary—it was steeped in the wise meditateness of an old-time professor with all his eccentricities and whimsies, so dear to our hearts.

The air above the city was clear of aircraft. This, due to a very wise decision on the part of the Moscow City Council forbidding night flights over the city. Only in the distance, somewhere on the horizon, floated a silver dirigible which maintained communications between Moscow and its satellite towns.

Directly below us lay the faculty buildings—white with red ornamentation—the sports grounds, and the old park with its fanciful maze of alleys and pathways, scarcely visible now in the evening shadows.

Many students are with us here on the lookout tower platform. By tradition, at the end of the last term, pilgrimages are made to the old tower. Tomorrow, most students will be jetting off to all parts of Earth, some even rocketing

to the Moon. Biata is with us, too. She has been assigned to an astronomical sputnik—the very biggest, a regular artificial planet. For more than a year now, on this satellite, observations have been continuously carried out on a sector of the sky where a supernova must soon flare up. Biata is glad she will be there on the most dangerous spot, but deep down she is uneasy.

All of us are a bit down in the mouth, sorry to part, yet at the same time wanting to plunge as quickly as possible into a world of new sensations. Kostya and I got a real break: we are leaving for BS-1009, a biostation in the Indian Ocean. A real floating island. It has a whole industrial set-up and a scientific centre for biological studies covering a wide range of problems. There are numerous islands of the kind anchored north and south of the equator in the rich zone of fishery and other marine industry, in the whale feeding grounds or plankton fields.

Kostya and Biata are over by the railing, looking down, and whispering. I think I know what Kostya's saying. He is recalling how we met her two years ago, "quite by chance", and not admitting, naturally, how hard we worked to bring about that chance meeting. Though it's hard to say what Kostya might bring up. Maybe they're talking about me? Biata has been sort of avoiding me for some time. She's a real mystery to me. I told her that once, straight out, and she took my sincerity for a rather crudely put compliment. Afterwards I analysed my conduct, and I might agree with her though, actually, I hadn't meant it for flattery. My grandad says that women are as big a mystery as a fossil

of the pliocene period (Grandad's a palaeobotanist), and he's dead right.

Today, for instance, when we were going up the steps to the main entrance, Biata took my arm—although Kostya was just as close to her as I. Now, she has drawn him aside. But that doesn't mean anything. My experience as an amateur psychologist—everybody says I've got a bent for psychoanalysis—tells me that I stand a better chance than Kostya. Why, even now Biata's eyes are searching for me in the crowd....

"Ive!" she called. "What're you doing over there all alone?"

"I don't know what's got into her," Kostya told me when I joined them. "Just imagine, she's got bitten by Weltschmerz, everything's wrong with the world."

Smiling, Biata shook her head.

"Not a bit. Just been doing some down-to-earth figuring, and there's good reason for worry. But I must admit I'm not clear on why you're so light-minded about it. Nobody knows what'll happen when the star explodes."

Kostya shrugged.

"Supernovae have been recorded many times and, as we see, nothing very terrible happened—either to the planet, or us."

"Today we know a little more about changes in the biosphere during and after the explosion of a supernova."

"But nothing frightening. It's all guess work."

"And the extinction of pterosauria? And mutations?" asked Biata.

"Ah, the poor brontosaurus! Ah, the mutations! Why, it's really marvellous to be a mutant! What's so bad about it if we grow wings,

or have gills, or an extra pair of legs and turn into centaurs, with arms yet? It'd sure be easy to move around! Imagine the records we could set in running or jumping events."

Biata could not help smiling.

"I don't find the prospect exactly fascinating."

It was fairly noisy. New groups of students kept coming up, running over to the railing, bursting into cries of excitement, laughter and shouts of greeting.

Down below, the city was growing dark but as yet no lights appeared in the streets or squares to break the harmony of the twilight hour.

From the loudspeakers came a familiar throat-clearing cough. At once there was silence, and everyone turned to face the telescreen, set in the wall of the lift-shaft. The cameraman showed a close-up of the rector's face, his blue eyes twinkling with a smile. He was always smiling, this enigmatic person whom we saw only on the screens of the varsity television centre, and occasionally in newsreels orbit-bounced round the world. Ippolit Ivanovich Repnin was one of the vice-chairmen of the World Association of Health and Happiness (WAHH). He waved his hand to greet the unseen audience.

"My dear friends!" came his voice, youthful and ringing. "My family and I wish you all the best during the holidays just beginning...." On the screen we could now see the rector's numerous family sitting at a large round table, and a robot whose several hands held a trayful of smoke-crystal goblets. Ippolit Repnin was standing, hands gripping the edge of the table.

"...a time when you will basically extend the knowledge received at your Alma Mater,

when you will get better acquainted with life, with your chosen sphere of science and the industries linked with it, and where you will test yourselves and find out if you've got any talent or not. I say about the same thing every year, and have for many years now (the rector's smile widened and everybody sitting at the table smiled with him), but don't think it's because of wool-gathering or absent-mindedness. (A crafty smile.) Not at all, I must give you something to remember, remind you of a few simple maxims. Remind you of many theories, some doubtful, which you will refute in the future. And so, one of the maxims is...." He fell silent, expectant.

As one voice, we filled in the rest: "Practice makes perfect, in science, too."

He nodded.

"That's it, exactly. Practice makes perfect. So let's get busy doing that this summer. However, I'm not against creative daring and new inspiration. Try them out as often as you can. But, doubt everything! And...." Repnin lifted a finger and silently waited again, expectant.

And we sang out: "Throw out all out-of-date scientific laws, however brilliant they are!"

He gestured in agreement.

"Absolutely right. I've nothing more to add, except to wish you good health and good luck." Reaching his hand out to the robot rolling towards him, the rector took a crystal glass and raised it high.

Ippolit Repnin said a few words more. Probably rather original. At the close of his short speeches, the rector was in the habit of making a brilliant remark that went the rounds among

the students long afterwards, up-dating and taking the form of a joke. This time, such explosions of applause and laughter broke out that we missed it, saw only his smiling face. Then everybody remembered of a sudden that he should have been in the students' cafeteria long ago, or at home for the graduation party.

"One and a half minutes, counting the pauses," said Kostya, when we were going down in the lift. "Was that ever a speech! There's a man who remembers he was a student once, too. A shame we didn't hear the last and best part."

A very tall student, wearing the last word in glasses, began quoting, the words ringing over our heads.

"To be useful, that's just to be useful; to be excellent is just to be excellent. But to be useful and excellent, that means to be great!"

Somebody else chipped in.

"You're already so great, all that's left for you is to be either useful or excellent."

Everybody in the lift howled with laughter, the deep bass of the one in glasses sounding louder than the rest.

Biata didn't even smile. When we came out of the lift and went towards the front doors, she said: "Instead of a rather doubtful aphorism, he might have talked about more important things."

"You figure the rector should have reminded us of the Supernova?" Kostya asked.

"You hit the nail. He should have said something, warned us! He knows a lot about it. And should have mentioned the possible danger."

"And spread panic?"

"No, to rally us to be ready."

Kostya realized he was skating on thin ice but, true to type, he couldn't stop arguing with Biata and they quarrelled. The evening was spoiled. She let us see her as far as the autocar, and drove off to her home in Golitsino.

"That's how fools make a mess of life, for themselves and those around them," said Kostya, with a gloomy frown. After a moment's silence, he added, "And especially for their friends."

"A pretty good summing-up, for self-analysis," I agreed.

This time, Kostya took my biting remark as well deserved, and humbly nodded.

"You're right, Ive," he added. "Absolutely right. But why didn't you put your oar in and change the topic? Divert us, somehow."

"I tried."

"Not much you did. That cursed star! If only it would blow up ahead of time."

"Small comfort, if it did."

"How right you are, Ive. If only I'd your common sense."

His honest regret and self-abasement led to my laying the table when we got to our room in the students' residence, and looking after Kostya as if he were an invalid. Our robot, Charley, was still peacefully resting in his niche beside the door. During our first term, Kostya had tried to revamp him up to modern standards: he had taken Charley apart but, for lack of time, hadn't yet reassembled him. So, to crown everything, after our bit of celebration I had to clean and put our digs to rights so I wouldn't have to do it tomorrow, the day we were leaving. Kostya should have done it. After all, he was the one who had "disembowelled" Charley. While I

used the vacuum-cleaner, a slack, unnerved and guilty Kostya sat before the telescreen watching a somewhat dismal programme from the series "If You've Nothing to Do". I worked fast, for I'd promised to be with my parents by midnight.

All the same, the evening ended up beautifully. Biata's face suddenly appeared on the videophone screen. As always, she acted as if nothing had happened.

"Are you boys home?" she asked.

"Of course we are!" roared Kostya, jumping up.

"A good thing I got hold of you!"

"Amazing piece of luck!" put in Kostya.

"Certainly is. I never dreamt I'd find you home."

Kostya was silent. Both of us grinned like utter fools. Biata looked us over silently, critically.

"Would you like to come over to my place? Now?"

"Would we ever!" we both sang out.

"That's fine, then. Better than the two of you sitting home on such a night, and even cleaning up!"

Pretending modesty, Kostya lowered his eyes.

"Hard-working, that's us. One of our many good points."

"Especially yours. Well, I'll expect you. There'll be dancing. We've got such a crowd here—friends of my sister. Watching them, I remembered you. So hurry along!" She gave us a smile and faded out.

Kostya grabbed a chestful of air, as if ready to make a deep dive, and sighed noisily.

"You noticed? Not a word about that devilish star!"

WE JET OFF

The students from our faculty were saying goodbye to each other, and jetting off on field work assignments. We stood on the yellow plastic floor in the very centre of the new jet and spaceport at Sheremetevo, and our colourful, noisy crowd drew everybody's attention. The outfits of the girls, made of pentasylon and dyed with illusorin, especially hit the eye. During the last term, we had taken part in synthesizing these amazing dyes that change colour under the action of biocurrents. In a week's time, the city streets would blossom with magnificent pentasylon-illusorin tones: but for now only our girls had them, drawing everybody's eyes and arousing the well-hidden jealousy of girls their age from other colleges. Illusorin opened tremendous prospects for biological research practice. The slightest change in the biofield, in a person's emotional state, changed the colour and its intensity. And what prospects it held out to psychologists! On these grounds, Oleg Zotov prophesied that the use of illusorin dyes would be only a temporary fad. And he was certainly right. A woman always has to surround herself with mystery, but in such clothing you could now read all her emotions, all her likes and dislikes. It was enough to glance at the hues taken on by the blouses, sweaters and slacks of our girls. Lita Chavkanadze's clothes were turning all shades of violet as she watched Andrei Bolotin, a handsome blond fellow, teaching Olga Golovina an intricate step from "Oh, ho-ho", one of the latest musicals. Finally, Andrei left Olga and went over to Lita. Her sweater first turned

ash-grey and then brightened up like grass in sunlight. Biata alone wore combination overalls made of the usual gold-tones protective material adopted this year by astronomers. She was the only one from the faculty of astronomy to be going into space. Her group, who were taking over the posts of the old personnel at the observatory, mainly consisted of outstanding astrophysicists. Not one had yet arrived at the spaceport. Unlike us, ordinary students, they had learned to value their time and would show up exactly on the dot. But Biata had come along with us.

Here and there, among the colourful crowd, you could see robots, sent by parents to see the kids off and give them parting words of advice. Close on my heels walked Uncle Vasya. Probably, he is one of the oldest robots on earth. He was programmed as a servant, to care for the children, to store information concerning the family and to keep household accounts. He wasn't good for anything else, but we loved this reliable automaton who was so closely linked with a great deal of our family life. Uncle Vasya once preserved in his memory all interesting events, including amusing family incidents. Until the play-back control of his magnetic recording tape was spoiled, he "remembered" all sounds in the house, often helping to straighten out our arguments. This last "advantage" drove my sister Kate wild; but still she defended Uncle Vasya with might and main when we talked of turning him in for an improved model.

Uncle Vasya was speaking in the calm, slightly grating voice of my grandfather at this particular moment.

"Ivan, I'm sending along with your jet *Albatross* my latest work, 'The Amount of Araucaria Pollen Found in Fossils of the Upper Pliocene Formation'. The work is way off the track from the problems that interest you, because of your youth and lack of scientific training; nevertheless, in my opinion, it contains a number of interesting ideas of a general nature...."

"Vasya, speed it up!" I commanded, and the voice of my grandad buzzed at the rate of a thousand bits a minute. And when, at my order, Vasya switched the programme back to its former frequency, Grandad was concluding.

"I hope I haven't tired you out with my useful, but slightly old-fashioned precepts. Keep well, and sometimes show your face on my video-phone."

After that, I heard a brilliant piece of music—a duet by Kate and Dad who played Ignatov's "Sunrise". The music suddenly broke off, and I heard Mum.

"My boy, I've ordered you a skiing outfit with heat-controls."

Dear old Mum! A ski suit with heat-controls—for the tropics!

Probably, it was a winter recording, I thought, and Uncle Vasya had got everything mixed up. But no! Mum mentioned our island station, even giving its co-ordinates, and she ended her monologue rather sadly.

"What a pity we see you so rarely of late. I never get enough of you. Why are you so disinterested in the arts, both Dad and you? I'm even worried about Kate—she's the most gifted of you all. She should take up music seriously. Instead, she recently started attending some

extra lectures in biochemistry. That's the result of your bad influence.... Sorry, but in thirty minutes I have to be at the studio. No, wait! Don't forget that we can see each other on Wednesdays from 1.40 to 1.55 p.m.”

Among those who came to see us off were the modern, universal robots of plastic, exact replicas of human beings. Many funny incidents occurred over them because many people failed to realize at first that they weren't human but robots. A dozen such robots made a pretty good choir or orchestra.

Kostya was being given farewell advice by a striped female robot, also of rather ancient origin.

“Well, thanks, Martha,” he cut her short. “Give them all my regards, but now go along with Uncle Vasya. He has also run out of advice. Only don't think of going by passenger train and flirting with strangers on the way.”

“I know,” sighed Vasya, sadly. “What chance have we got to flirt if we have to travel in a rusty tube along with inanimate objects!”

When our robots had gone off towards the goods underground, Kostya and I milled around trying, as hard as we could, to put in our two cent's worth as to why our national team lost at the last Olympics in Rio-de-Janeiro; or butting into conversations on various topics with neighbouring groups, yelling to classmates going by and bawling out ‘Happy landing!’. Among all this, from underfoot, we suddenly heard the commanding voice of the robot-controller, reminding us that only ten minutes were left to flight time. Up drove an autocar, whose colour matched the seat-counters of the passen-

gers taking the next flight. True, not many of our fellows used the cars. They all ran, with the noisy gaiety of freshmen, along the coloured walks that arrowed between the wheels of the autocars heading for the flight ramp.

At first Biata stood with her friends and when they ran off, still chattering away, she joined us and, taking Kostya's arm, drew him aside. Kostya gave me a look that expressed pity and badly concealed triumph.

Last night, after a wonderful beginning at Biata's, I had the stupidest quarrel with her. Again over the Supernova. Kostya began it during a break between dances, and I got into the argument and started to prove—and did prove—that Biata shouldn't fly to the satellite. I couldn't have thought up anything more insulting. And here she was, *tete-a-tete* with Kostya. Her purse should contain a bottle of *Stardust* scent (unless she'd thrown it away, of course) and spools with magnetic wire recordings of books, music and films. I'd like to know if that film is there, I wondered, the one of our trip during the winter holidays! Probably it had shared the same fate as *Stardust*. Too bad. I felt specially low about my *Stardust*.

The fame of this scent, an aromatic poem, had spread throughout the whole institute. The perfume factories in Moscow, Voronezh, Riga and even Paris gave me no peace, demanding the formula and my working notes. They went crazy when they found out I'd thrown them all into the waste-basket. Naturally, I remembered something of it, but that "something" brought sorry results. *Stardust* had been a complicated synthesis, its chief component being my feeling for Biata.

So Biata had become the sole owner of my invention, a unique combination in the scent line, which she called *Stardust*.

Now I caught its tenderly sad fragrance: there was something musical about it.

Okay then, I thought, let it always remind her of me, and our stupid quarrel. The aroma will never go away. All her things, and Biata too, will always bear the scent of *Stardust*.

For some reason, the very thought gave me bitter satisfaction.

Biata was saying something to Kostya. With bent head, her fingers lightly touched his sleeve.

At times came the boom of the starting boosters, the deep hoot of the tow-tractors drawing the ships away from the boarding galleries to the launching grounds and the hiss of the autocars carrying past us the more substantial travellers. With feigned indifference, I turned my back on Biata and Kostya, sadly gazing round the waiting lounge which reminded me of an indoor winter stadium, only much larger and more attractive.

With bitter criticism, I tried to think that this building, entailing so much work, was lacking in warmth, that you felt lonely here for some reason, sort of lost, as if you suddenly found yourself in a remote spot in the Sahara or the Kara Kum desert, where the sands were not yet conquered. The only thing that gladdened the eye was the golden parquetry with its translucent circles and ornamental design created by craftsmen of the Vasilyev school: Vasilyev, artist and psychoanalyst. One had only to stare intently at the floor for the circles and lines to begin forming various pictures. They were born

in the subconscious, and then projected with surprising clarity onto the floor. I saw the portrait of Biata, as if on a stained-glass panel created by a master of past centuries. Her face was so severe and aloof that it made my flesh creep. I had felt something like it before, when I first experienced weightlessness. Everything you are used to seems to slip from underfoot, your hands catch empty space. But this unusual sensation doesn't last long. In a couple of seconds or more, you build up resistance and quickly get hold of yourself. Astonishment at the unusual passes away, to be replaced by the joy of a new sensation.

However, I felt no such joy now. I became suddenly terrified, as in childhood once when I sneaked into my grandfather's library and started looking at the magnetic-tape pictures borrowed from the Central Historical Museum. On the small screen I saw a field, a debris of machines with a boy of my age standing in the very middle. A man in a strange black uniform went up to the boy and shot him in the face....

The robot was announcing the flights and the minutes left before take-off. My friends clapped me on the shoulder, said something, and noisily entered the autocar or ran after the fleeing spot of light.

"He's buried in Nirvana," somebody said. "Don't interfere with his following the path of perfection."

"Good-bye! Hey, good-bye! Kostya, what's up with him?"

Biata looked at me. Her eyes were tender and strict.

"He's perfecting himself, like a Yogi," ex-

plained Kostya. "It's dangerous to rouse him from this condition."

And they burst into laughter.

A lilac autocar rolled up. Such cars only delivered passengers to the cosmodrome launch pad.

I squeezed Biata's hand.

"I'll be there for three weeks," she said. "Just think how lucky I am. The only one to go, of all this year's graduates! If only the Supernova flares up when I'm there! Professor Wood is sure it won't be long now...."

She thought only about that hypothetical supernova star which, by the reckoning of astrophysicists, had already exploded somewhere in the boundless cosmic depths thousands of years ago. Its micro-fragments were flying towards us, the avalanche increasing every moment.

Biata stood alone on the autocar, severe and aloof.

"We'll expect you!" called Kostya.

"Thanks. I'll be sure to look you up on your island."

Kostya and I ran beside the autocar, holding on to the handrail. Suddenly Biata smiled.

"We'll be seeing each other," she said, and began digging into her handbag.

"Get away from the autocar! It's dangerous!" thundered the robot from the Accident Prevention Service.

The autocar stopped beside a row of chairs, where a tall, sparse old man was standing with five students—two girls and three young men in combination overalls like Biata's.

Judging by the badges they wore, the students were from Tomsk University, and the tall

old man was James Wood, famous astrophysicist, who had predicted the flare-up of the Supernova. When the autocar moved off, Biata swung her arm and something flashed through the air and rolled with a jingle along the floor. Two metal discs. On one side was embossed "Astronomical Observatory Cosmos-10" and on the reverse was the number 943, with the cipher "5" in brackets. Each disc gave one the right for a five-minute talk with the cosmic station—that is, with Biata.

Clutching our discs, Kostya and I stared after the lilac car. It made a round trip of almost all the airport rotunda, took on another ten passengers, and then disappeared through a brightly lit exit into an underground tunnel.

"At one time I thought of taking up astrobiology," remarked Kostya, meditatively.

"It's still not too late."

"Yes, but...."

"What does that significant 'but' mean?" I asked.

"You see, Biata said that for some time she has been attracted by the ocean as well."

We stood in silence for several minutes. Now and then Kostya smiled, staring into space, and when he finally looked at me I caught a sort of paternal sympathy in his glance. Kostya's a surprisingly simple-hearted fellow. Every stirring of his conscience or soul, as they used to say, is openly written on his large features. And you don't have to be a subtle psychologist to understand him, though he doesn't utter a word. Yet, at the same time, he considers himself a reticent, enigmatic fellow. This feeling seemed to grow on him, especially after we met Biata.

He thought he was hiding from me how he felt about her, and this tormented him. For some reason, he didn't take me seriously as a rival.

"Don't get sore, Ivan," he told me once. "But you and Biata aren't compatible. I saw that right away. She has a very emotional, subtle nature, lofty, yet extremely purposeful. I'm sure she'll make a great astrophysicist. She needs a man with an absolutely special personality, someone to supplement her, someone whose field is more or less adjacent. But you must realize there's an awfully enormous gap between your psychofield and hers. You haven't the right make-up, psychically speaking. Just dig that, and don't get in the dumps. Be a philosopher about it!"

Kostya was a hot admirer of the modern theory of psychological fields. Certainly Biata's field and mine were at odds, whereas Kostya's curve almost coincided with hers, and this lent him wings. But maybe psychological fields don't matter much, the more so because they are not constant. And that wasn't the main thing, anyway.

Not that! Not that! I repeated silently, to myself. The main thing is, she gave me a disc. Which means she has thought about me.... But Kostya has a piece of nickel exactly the same.... What has that got to do with it? What would Kostya have thought if she'd give both discs to me? She's wonderful. And everything on earth's wonderful!

I admired the sweeping arc twinkling at the top of the stained-glass panels on which the history of aeronautics and conquering space was depicted. All of a sudden I was startled by a

marvellous scent that enveloped me like an unseen cloud. Yes, it was Biata's perfume, my perfume, my gift to her. The scent came from the disc I clenched hard in my fist. I wonder who thought up the custom of giving our dear ones things made with our own hands, out of our own minds, made with love? I had searched half a year for that inimitable combination of molecules....

I was brought down to earth by Kostya's voice.

"There's a quasi-incident for you! Looks like we're hopelessly left behind. You hear the robot screaming himself to death? Unlucky beggars! As an unbalanced type, you may get away with it; but it's not like me at all. Run, before it's too late! Wait, you run if you want, but I'll ride, if you don't mind. Somehow this farewell business has taken all my strength away, physically and psychologically."

He jumped on an autocar, and I ran along the narrow orange road, crossing the mosaic floor.

MAN OF MYSTERY

Kostya and I were the last passengers aboard. The robot controller gave us a ticking off.

"You should be in your seats not later than one minute before the hatches are closed. You've got only five seconds left... four... three... two... one!" The round door slammed tight. There was a click of automatic locks. The robot continued, in a peevish tone: "Your seats are in the round salon, numbers 963 and 964. Please occupy them

as fast as possible. In ninety seconds, the *Albatross Number 763/5* moves to the start."

"Right, old boy!" said Kostya. "Thanks a lot. Sorry."

"Don't waste my time with unnecessary talk. Put questions only concerned with our flight. This way, please." He moved along the green carpeted aisle between the seats.

The other passengers followed us with smiles. Now the robot would give us no peace, reading the instructions on conduct during flight and anticipating our every wish. This was special punishment for breaking the rules.

"Here are your seats—963 and 964."

"Fine, old boy, thanks. Now you can go and get recharged," said Kostya.

"I have received sufficient energy to last the whole flight. Recharging time is at 6.35 a.m.," replied the robot, unperturbed, and continuing to focus his one yellow eye upon us. "The wash-rooms are in the tail of the ship, also compartments with ionized showers, robot masseurs and barber shops...."

"We know all that, old boy," said Kostya. "You may go to your place."

"The flight lasts four hours and forty-eight and a half minutes."

"He'll never stop!" groaned Kostya. "How can you turn him off?"

Big-eyed, a girl turned to stare over the top of the seat in front of us.

"Don't try," she said, openly sympathetic. "The designers foresaw this variant. He can't be turned off. The programme for passengers breaking rules lasts thirty minutes. Next time, you won't be late."

The *Albatross* began to sway clumsily: we were being towed to the runway.

Kostya conversed with the girl. The robot concentrated his attention on me, passing over to an intimate whisper, for some reason.

"A circular telepanorama offers you the opportunity of observing the earth's surface throughout the flight."

"Oh, so you're off to the Whale Farm!" exclaimed the girl, happily.

The robot aimed the loudspeaker installed in his side right at my ear, and a flood of information about the ship poured forth.

"Besides carrying 2000 passengers, the Albatross-type goods-passenger liner takes on board 350 tons of freight. At a height of 30 kilometres, flying speed is 5000...."

Kostya gave me a dig in the ribs.

"Vera thinks we'd better split that idiot's attention. You go towards the navigation cabin, and I'll head for the Institute of Communal Services. Vera's on her way to the Ceylon arboretum, also for summer field work," he added as he jumped to his feet and quickly moved aft.

On the left side of the semicircular screen swam the night darkness, flooded by the phantasmal light of Moscow's artificial moons.

When I stood up, the robot gave a start, and his yellow eye blinked in perplexity: he was making a decision. In a few seconds, the light in the robot's eye steadied: the decision was made. And he fell in behind me, muttering useful bits of information. Incidentally, he told me that on the *Albatross* you could get a copy of any book from the ship's library within half an hour of ordering it. I recalled that somehow

or other I hadn't got round to bringing along *The Language and Psychology of Primates of the Sea*. This unusual work had created a sensation in the scientific world, and was a best-seller all over the planet.

Dolphins had long occupied a place second only to man in the genealogical tree of life. But by established tradition this place was considered to be on a much lower level than was actually deserved by our marine brothers by intelligence. I had read, and listened to, excerpts from the book, for it came out just in time to coincide with a cycle of personal check-ups on our knowledge. So far, however, I'd never managed to read all of it.

The island we were going to was rated as one of the main centres in composite studies of marine primates, and I didn't want to get the reputation of an ignoramus when I met scientists there. At the same time, I was seriously intending to make a contribution of my own to this interesting branch of science.

The importunate robot saw me to the library door, still reciting instructions for passenger conduct during flight time.

Bending over a control panel in the small room was a tall, spare man arrayed in an inconceivably old-fashioned suit. He was completely bald and the crown of his head was adorned with an embroidered Uzbek skull-cap of apparently very ancient work. I'd seen something similar in the Samarkand Museum. He was quickly pressing the varicoloured keys, sending orders for books. Finishing, he straightened up. I was struck with surprise at his face so sunburnt and, though almost without a wrinkle, awfully an-

cient. When he wasn't talking, it looked like a doll's or a robot's. You kept wanting to touch his cheek to see whether it was made of plastic. His eyes were in direct contrast: black, lively and full of ironical sparks. He made room for me but, for some reason, did not leave.

Confused, I examined the library apparatus. I had never had occasion to use this varicoloured numbered keyboard. Besides, I was struck by another strange thing about the man, or man-like creature. Somewhere inside his body there was a kind of ticking sound: some sort of device was working away like an old-time chronometer. I couldn't be mistaken, because all the electronic machines in the library operated silently and he moved so close to me that we were almost touching.

He spoke to me. His voice was not loud, and the timbre was extremely pleasant to the ear.

"It's all quite simple, young man. Besides, here are the operating instructions. However, they're not worth reading. What book have you in mind?"

I named it.

He smiled.

"Yes, that little thing became pretty popular. But what's strange is this. Real comprehension of the idea expounded in the book can be found only among the wide mass of readers, as they once used to express it. The reading masses, especially the young readers, received it with enthusiasm, while the majority of venerable scientists wrote the devil knows what about it! Did you read the last issue of the Academy News? No? A good thing, too. If I had a head of hair like yours, I would have turned grey when I read

those apologies for ideas by men of science. How odd it is, that even in your time"—he emphasized the word 'your'—"cohorts of scientists, despite the burden of a thousand-year-long experience, are not able to understand that the creative forces of nature cannot be confined to the creation of one single apparatus," he clapped his forehead, "squeezed into the skull-box of such an imperfect creature as man is, so far." He caught his head as if afraid for its safety, and smiled. "The gravest, and most protracted disease of mankind is conservative thinking. This has always been the case. You should know it from the history of the development of cognition. Of course, we've made advances in this field but, regrettably, they are not in proportion to the general progress. Apparently, the load of entropy, accumulated over the centuries, makes itself felt. Mind you, this relates mainly to scientists bound within the framework of narrow specialization. All the same, there's no reason to lose heart. Their time is over. Nowadays, a real scientist can address himself to all mankind. Just imagine," he squeezed my elbow hard, "five million letters! In only half a year! I had to answer them only through the press.... Let's introduce ourselves. I'm Polikarpov, Pavel Mefodevich.... That's right, in person. 'Plenipotentiary Representative of the Dolphins', as one of my witty colleagues put it, recently. Incidentally, he never guessed how much satisfaction I got out of that. It has a ring to it: 'Plenipotentiary Representative of People in the Hydrosphere'. Not bad!"

I agreed that it sounded quite impressive.

When I gave my name and spoke of the aim

of my trip, he caught me by the shoulders and gave me a good-hearted shake.

"Wonderfull! A zoology student on summer field work! Imagine, I'm going there, too—for scientific work. This is probably your first time in that part of the world, but it's a whole ten years now since I chose that floating island for my laboratory. So it was you, and another young man, that they told me about a few days ago? Asked me to look after you. Listen, suppose we go to the bar and mark the occasion with a hot or cold drink? Looks as though we'll have to stick to cold—they don't serve hot beverages on jets of this type. Well, don't waste time, nor lose heart, and let's go to the non-alcoholic bar." He turned to the robot: "As for you, you old bandit, stop your muttering and God go with you to your roosting place."

"The words 'God go with you' are incomprehensible. My programming doesn't include them. Please apply to the information bureau, compartment 10, room 32."

"Thanks, brother! Oh, I never saw such a donkey!"

"I'm not your brother nor a donkey. My name is: Robot 3B-803 with Feedback. I am obliged to offer my services to passengers, and give explanations of primary complexities."

"So do me the service of going to your place."

"That is a violation. Don't divert me from doing my duty. You are only extending the time of our talk."

Pavel Mefodevich burst out laughing.

"There's a type for you! Did you hear him? He's not lacking in humour."

We got rid of the robot finally with the help

of a ship's mechanic who was walking through the corridor.

"Now we'll just neutralize this chatterbox." The mechanic winked, and put his hand behind the robot's neck. There was a click, and the robot, smacking his vacuum-cupped feet on the rubber steps, went his way.

Vera and Kostya were already sitting in the bar. Leaning his elbows on the table-top, and staring fixedly into Vera's laughing eyes, Kostya was saying something with a sombre gravity. Catching sight of me, Vera waved an invitation to join them at their table. We poured pineapple juice in our glasses, and went over. Pavel Mefodevich glanced at Vera and his eyes came to a stop on Kostya's thick, tousled hair.

"What, caught in a breeze? The wind's rising, now. Nothing will stop it. No matter how many reefs you take in, the wind will run a gale. And let it. Only watch you trim the sails. Your port's far off. Oh, so far! Don't dream of dropping anchor. The cable will break. Well, you think the old man talks conundrums?"

"No, it's as clear as day," Vera answered for us all. "A good metaphor."

"Nice of you to think so. In olden times, they used to say: 'It's important to find a common language'. But I'm interrupting you. What was she so hotly trying to convince you of?" he asked Kostya.

In an emphatic, lively style, Kostya related what he and Vera had been discussing, stealing a glance at me.

"Vera thinks that a race of 'thinking' plants may be created by way of a directed evolution. Both she and Kokisi Mokimoto, her guide and

mentor, can't give up hoping to develop some kind of arborescent type of animal. The way they figure it, one of the plants under experimentation will soon start walking about."

The academician laughed rather unkindly.

"Is that the Mokimoto that operates in Ceylon?" he asked.

"Operates?" queried Vera, blankly.

"Well, toils, works. In my time the synonym was 'operate'".

"Yes, he operates there," Vera smiled. "I was giving Kostya a general outline of our operations... phooey, what a word! ... And he was reciting a dialogue that might go on between tree-sapiens flying in a spaceship."

"Their dialogue must have been very amusing," remarked the academician. Drumming his fingers on his glass, and looking us over, he grinned. "By the way, I was also once interested in the question. I remember, I even wrote something on it. It was praised. Specifically, on the nervous system of the mimosa. Or, let us say, of the oak. I even began to wonder, and seriously, whether I had the moral right to eat green salad. At that time, we were also extremely excited over the question of thinking robots capable of producing exact replicas of themselves who would finally conquer the world and destroy mankind. Models of the conflicts were built, based on the class struggles of those times. And how much nervous energy and printing paper were wasted on depicting other worlds, and describing meetings with Martians, Jupiterites and inhabitants of other planetary systems. We were always searching for brothers

of the intellect in other planetary systems, and missed the ones right under our noses!"

Mischievous sparks flashed in Vera's eyes.

"What do you mean? Did they really sneak in on us incognito?"

He threatened her with his finger, his eyes narrowing.

"You know perfectly well what I mean. Oh, and by the way, I have information that your worthy Kokisi Mokimoto is, even now, actually holding in captivity twelve primates of the sea." He shrugged impatiently. "Something strange is going on: people looking for nerves in cabbages, and refusing to see them in intelligent creatures! And this in our days, when we go walking on the moon, on Mars and Venus. We dream of designing ships to travel to other sun systems, and not only dream but prepare to launch them. I absolutely refuse to understand what the world is up to!" He rose, and raked us with a glance so scathing, one would think we were guilty of all the spurious theories and views in the whole world.

With a smack of the lips, producing a sound that apparently indicated extreme disapproval, he turned on his heels and left the bar.

"I never met original people like him before!" cried Vera.

"He's a regular dolphin himself," laughed Kostya, "and even sounds like one. Where did you dig him up?"

I said that he would be our chief during summer field work.

"It never rains but it pours!" Kostya gave a low whistle. "I can imagine how much we'll

learn under such a powerful intellect, jabbering about the wind and all."

Vera lowered her eyes.

"I like him a lot," she said. "More than likely he's a real scientist, like our Kokisi. A scientist with a very wide range of knowledge simply cannot stand other people's mistakes and, probably, is just as hard on himself. There's something unusual about the man's face. How well he put it about the wind! He's like a personage from an ancient painting or fresco. What a shame I offended him. I really must go and apologize." She got up quite as suddenly as the academician, and hurried off.

"You've got a real gift for arranging interesting meetings. And you sure picked the right time to show up with that scientific monster!"

The quarrel between us was interrupted by a ten-minute moon telecast. On the medium-sized oval screen appeared Nadya Pavlova, announcer of the scientific section of the World Broadcasting Association. She stated that the latest news from the moon would now be shown.

"After meeting that estimable old fossil," said Kostya, frowning at the light reflected on his glass, "I'm beginning to wonder about all the lovely things awaiting us on that basalt structure floating in the warm briny deeps...." He fell silent when he saw the astronauts on the silvery surface of the moon.

The scenes shifted sharply. Now the astronauts were moving among fantastic, rocky cliffs, dissolving at times into inky-black shadows. A powerful reflector lit up a conglomeration of rocks resembling an oddly formed archway. The astronauts—there were three—walked through it.

The commentator spoke in quiet, mysterious tones, explaining every step of the researchers. Now they were passing into a cave with brownish, porous walls. Suddenly the whole screen was flooded with a gamut of coloured lights.

These were the flashing gleams of strangely constructed crystals that resembled sea anemones.

"Moonstone!" said the announcer.

One of the astronauts swung his geologist's hammer, and a large 'anemone' soundlessly showered into gleaming dust.

"Apparently, the cave is of volcanic origin," continued the announcer.

"Now it would be quite safe to settle on the moon," whispered Kostya. "You could set up a whole town in that cave: no meteorite could harm it!"

Vera came in.

"Boys, he's asleep in his seat," she said. "I left him a note.... Poor things," she added, referring to the astronauts. "All the time in space and, what's more, in such dreadful spacesuits! Brr! A green, living forest is quite another thing. Aren't you boys going to take a nap?"

"On such a night?" Kostya stifled a yawn. "Actually, I never sleep during short flights."

"That's fine, then. I'd like to show you one film-tape. Kostya, turn off that horrible moon, and plug in my portable 'Jupiter' to the tele-screen."

In place of the cold lunar landscape, the screen was filled with the luxuriant green of the tropics. Red and yellow parrots flitted through the branches.... Came the fragrant scent of flowers. I closed my eyes, and almost at once fell asleep in the supple lounge chair.

I dreamt of Biata. Dressed in overalls, she was walking along the edge of a lunar crater, smiling at something. And I also smiled, and walked beside her, not at all surprised that we could breathe in a vacuum and still feel wonderful.

Loud laughter came from behind an impenetrable spot of moon shadow. I opened my eyes. Laughter, the splash of water came from the screen. In a large swimming pool, a throng of young people were racing on dolphins. Through the noise, I caught Kostya's voice.

"You must excuse him, he's had so many impressions today. And not exactly pleasant ones. He did well to opt out.... He has to keep fit. Had a spot of trouble, you know.... One girl from the astronomical.... Their fields don't at all synchronize...."

I felt in my pocket for Biata's disc, gripped it tight in my fist, and fell asleep again.

TRACKING DOWN PIRATES

From Colombo we continued our trip on board the *Kallmar* (*Squid*), an old battleship re-equipped for sea patrol service. Long, narrow, with beautiful lines, she reminded me of a sea mammal which had adapted itself to water over a long period of evolution. The *Kallmar* sliced the dark blue water without apparent effort. Dolphins were swimming to port and starboard. They easily outraced the ship, turned back, and put on a real circus show or frolicked in the foamy bow-wave thrown off by the ship's forefoot.

Kostya and I entered the conning-tower. Since the time the *Kallmar* had been converted from a battleship, everything was preserved as it was: even the controls for artillery fire or torpedo attacks, though the torpedo tubes and guns had been removed and melted down long ago. Of all these terrible arms, one alone remained—a heavy-calibre gun on the foredeck. In the wheel-house, the ship was steered by an ordinary helm though it would have been easy to put in an automatic pilot to do this rather boring job.

At the helm stood a student about our age from the Marine Academy. To my surprise, his derisive brown face did not look disgruntled at having to waste his precious time on this job. On the contrary, he seemed to be downright enjoying himself as he handled such an old-fashioned mechanism. He wore wide white trousers and jersey to match with a navy-blue collar, while a red beret was perched jauntily on his sun-bleached hair. His outfit was pretty much in bad taste, yet it suited him.

Kostya clapped him on the shoulder.

“Are you ever dressed up! A sailor right out of ‘Sea Rovers’! I adore that musical opera.”

The helmsman wasn’t at all hurt.

“No way out,” he said. “Sea regulations. I didn’t like this archaic get-up either, at first, but afterwards I got used to it and valued the comfort as suits go.” He turned to Kostya, with a look of alarm. “Don’t lay a finger on anything, or you’ll be sounding the Call to Arms or even ringing for Full Reverse Engines. Just imagine how you’ll explain it to the Captain!”

"Don't worry. It's not the first time I've been on such a liner."

"Nice to meet a colleague in our latitudes."

"Same here. By the way, my name's Kostya."

"And mine's Andrei. So you're heading for the Whale Farm?"

"Right, old pal! The root of knowledge is bitter, as our forefathers used to say, so Ivan and I are being dragged off to the float."

"Don't get in the dumps! Last year I was milking whales, too. Had a devil of a good time!"

"So you're also a brother biologist?"

"Right."

"So how come you're on this museum-ship?"

"Answered the call of the sea. I always wanted to go in for something real. Dreamt of it when I was still a boy."

"And biology?"

"Who would deny it's a useful science? But here, there's something different."

"Romantic?"

"More than enough. But I'm attracted to it because of the continuous struggle. There's always a risk which, luckily, even a cyber can't guard against. Though there are still mother's darlings who don't care for cyclones, and they have learned to tame or kill, rather, those bewildering whirlwinds. All the same, there's always a bit of a fresh breeze, a squall or a good trade-wind. And sometimes, if you're lucky, you might run into nice little cyclone of local significance. That's all we've got left, while the sun shines and our little globe keeps turning."

He swung the helm, squinting as he looked at the blinding blue water, and continued.

"Of course, I didn't change schools just for the fun of rocking on waves of different dimensions. Naturally, I haven't given up biology. You see, I'm specializing in deep-sea creatures and sea primates. My dream is to catch, at long last, the Great Sea Serpent."

"But hasn't it been caught yet? Seems to me I saw your serpent in a newsreel!" said Kostya.

"You saw only a little serpent, my dear fellow. It hardly goes more than 20 metres, but the Great Serpent is no less than forty. Only one man in the whole world has ever seen it with his own eyes—that remarkable skindiver, Onoe Itimura."

"Are you hunting your serpent now?" I asked.

"No. Something far simpler. We're after Black Jack, though with our means and liberal methods, it might take years...."

And he told us about the remarkable killer whale or grampus, the leader of a whole pirate gang. The *Kallmar* had sent out a dolphin detachment to track them down.

"And so we're making one more try at catching him," went on the helmsman. "But, between you and me, we're not likely to. He's learned to even get away from air reconnaissance planes. It's impossible to tell him apart from the peaceful grampuses with whom we already have contacts. We've sent truce envoys to him—grampuses and dolphins. But none of them returned. Jack killed them."

"And you still stand on ceremony with him?" cried Kostya.

"We carry out instructions. You know that all primates of the sea are under the defence of the law. The Council for Ocean Affairs are still

of the opinion that we haven't yet used all educative measures. Incidentally, yesterday he killed a whale, and a week ago he burst into a fish plantation; by some miracle or other he found that one section had a weak force field. The plantation no longer exists."

"And you're going to try to talk him into not doing such fool things any more?" asked Kostya.

"This time, we can use ampoules." He rolled his eyes at us in pretended fright. "The Cap! Save yourselves, boys. Out the left door!"

All the passengers were standing or sitting under a deck awning, enjoying the smooth sea and the dolphins. Besides the academician, Kostya and I, a whole group of scientists in different fields of ocean studies were going to the island. Including the botanist, Kokisi Mokimoto.

Pavel Mefodevich walked along, stepping over the outstretched feet of those settled in deck chairs, smiling and staring in every direction. He was satisfied with today, and the brilliant operation he had carried out in freeing the dolphins.

The oceanarium at Colombo is connected with the sea by a long canal. A year before, some trusting dolphins were lured through the canal into the oceanarium, and the exit was closed off with a heavy grilled barrier. Certainly, from man's point of view on conveniences for living creatures of another type, everything possible had been provided: running water, plenty of food, comparatively spacious premises. Even so, the sea primates felt as if they were in jail. They had expressed their protest, but the botanists didn't hear it; to be more exact, they didn't know of it because they had never tried to establish contact with the dolphins.

The learned secretary of the dendrarium, Kokisi Mokimoto, was literally crushed by the onslaughts of Academician Polikarpov. The Japanese only whispered excuses, pressing his left hand to his heart and giving a sickly smile to show how much he regretted what had happened. Finally, he managed to speak.

"Forgive us.... We did not think we were infringing on their liberty. We did everything to make their life pleasant. They could even turn music on, or off, as they wished—music specially composed for them. Sorry, I don't remember the composer's name. What a pity we had no means of making contact."

The talk had taken place in the greenhouse pavilion which served the learned secretary as a laboratory.

"No means for contact!" thundered Polikarpov, and took a small yellow box from a shelf filled with many apparatuses. "The latest model of 'LC-8006'! So far, over a thousand of these have been put out, and for some reason one of them was sent here. It seems to me you should have known the possibilities of this invention?"

"Oh, y-es...."

"I venture to doubt it. If I'm not right, I apologize. But, nevertheless, it wouldn't be out of place to remind you that with the aid of LC-8006—such a fool name too!—with its aid, we can talk even with Martians: if, of course, there are any still living on the Red Planet. We can exchange information with space visitors from anywhere at all, whatever their media of life—carboniferous, fluoric, silicic or God knows what else. I hope I haven't tired you with such

a verbose talk about facts known to every school-boy of the first cycle?"

"Not at all. It's even very interesting, though...."

"Though you are perfectly acquainted with it? Well then, so as not to waste valuable time, come along and immediately set free those miserable inmates. By the way, I'll teach you to use the LC-8006, the marvellous invention with the foolish name...."

The Academician walked towards the oceanarium; Mokimoto and I could barely keep up with him.

"A very original mind!" the learned secretary whispered to me. "His way of talking makes a very strong impression."

Surrounded by dolphins, Kostya and Vera were splashing about. All of a sudden, Vera jumped on the gleaming back of a dolphin and, laughing, rode him in fast circles.

"Disgraceful!" cried Polikarpov. "You're turning them into playthings! We must put a stop to this humiliating business at once!" He lowered a hydrophone into the water, said something, and in a flash all the dolphins were racing his way.

Vera fell off with a plop and began, between fits of laughter, to explain something to Kostya.

For the first time, I heard a non-televised dialogue between man and dolphin.

The Academician employed bombastic words taken from old-time *Phrase Books* on dolphin language.

"I greet you, brothers of the sea!"

The dolphins answered in the same vein.

"And we greet you, brothers of the Earth!"

"We have come to ask your forgiveness for restricting your freedom of movement so long, though it was not from ill will."

"It's been difficult for us in this shallow round pool, but we have no hard feelings towards you."

"In a moment the barrier that closes the exit to the sea will be raised, and you may go where you will. On my part, I invite you to travel with us southwest of here to one of the floating islands, where many brothers of the sea live and work with us for the common good. Do you agree?"

"We agree...."

Pavel Mefodevich named the place of meeting—the outlet from the harbour.

Mokimoto, hands on heart, bowed in farewell.

He uttered not a word, and this mute admission of his fault touched Polikarpov.

"Forgive me, I'm a bit of an old bully." Suddenly he clapped Mokimoto on the back. "Listen, colleague, why don't you come along with us to the island? I know you've got work to do, and haven't much time to spare, but do it as a favour to me, all the same."

Kokisi Mokimoto looked around his green laboratory, smiled, and held out his hand.

So here we were, rocking on the gentle swell of the Indian Ocean, with a head wind alleviating the tropic heat.

Pavel Mefodevich stopped beside Mokimoto who was stretched out in his chair with half-closed eyes.

"I hope, sir, you're not too annoyed with me?"

"O-oh, Mr. Polikarpov. I'm so grateful, really! It's a long time since I had the chance of taking such a pleasant trip. I'm so fond of the sea! My forefathers were fishermen from Kioto. Incidentally, there's a golden dolphin on the town's coat-of-arms."

"I know. There are many legends about it. But the most veritable of them all is the one describing a dolphin saving one of the founders of the town. Perhaps he was one of your forefathers?"

"Unfortunately, our family has no such romantic legends."

They fell silent. Then Mokimoto spoke again.

"Amazing how peaceful you feel when you become aware of the beauty of the world and the unity of the beginnings of life!"

"I quite agree, and can only add that such thoughts are more apt to come to us when we travel like this in an old-fashioned boat and along ancient routes, where your outstretched hand can almost touch the ocean, earth, mountains.... Not when we travel by jets or super-express trains or on those hellish amphibian cruisers where we sit in hermetic, padded capsules and are tossed from continent to continent at a speed that's incredible."

"There lies the advantage of transport means that are now almost past history," smiled Mokimoto.

"To our sorrow," he continued, "we make little use of them these days. Even we scientists, who have devoted our lives to the study of nature, prefer fast, time-saving machines. So we gain through speed something we don't need at all, but lose

the main thing—the feeling of the vastness of our planet.”

“Well, I can’t complain,” Polikarpov shrugged his shoulders. “I spend a great part of my time here,” and he swept his arms in a wide circle, “in this cradle of all the living, where too much speed is simply impossible, and unnecessary....”

Kostya came up and pulled me by the arm. He led me to the very edge of the bridge amidships, where it overhung the water.

“What are you listening to those old gabblers for!” he said. “All the talk now will be about underwater towns.... Just what I thought! That one, in the green glasses, lived for six months in ‘Octopus Settlement’ on a coral reef; and now he’ll be delivering a lecture that will last for the next 300 miles. Better if we go below, and talk with the dolphins over the ship’s hydrophone.”

Pulling me down the companionway ladder, he went on talking.

“I’m getting all the more curious about our chief. An interesting, unique and mysterious personality. Did it ever strike you that he is much like a biological robot? I keep thinking about that all the time. Vera’s of the same opinion. Don’t you smile, either. She has a perfect ear, and she caught the sound of something working away inside him, some kind of a pick-up or a control unit like the ones used in the old “kitchen” robots. Of course, he’s perfected to the *n*th degree.... And you never noticed anything?”

I said not a word in answer to Kostya, though I clearly recalled how I’d pricked up my ears

at the sound of the hollow, rhythmic ticking when I'd stood beside the mysterious Academician in the library on the *Albatross*.

A SUNNY MORNING

Penelope woke me up at exactly six o'clock. She stood by the bed, incessantly repeating in a dreary monotone: "Time to get up. Time to get up. Six o'clock. Six o'clock."

I pulled the blanket over my head and tried to sleep, but soon realized that it was impossible with Penelope near by. She could stand there for a whole eternity and babble away, winking her one eye. Besides, I had programmed her myself to wake me up at six sharp. Kostya and I had agreed we would get up now at sunrise. Suddenly, my bed tilted over on its side and I found myself dumped on the floor: also my programming, if I failed to get up within five minutes' time. I could have slept on the floor, but I didn't know what Penelope was likely to do next. Judging by the operating instructions on her back, she had a reserve of "logical decisions". What they might be, I almost got a taste of myself. I jumped aside just in time, as Penelope grabbed up the bedding with her hand-levers and made off with it to the door. I barely had time to press the yellow button on the shoulder of the painstaking servant to interrupt the chain of her logical decisions.

"What did you want to do with the bedding?" I asked, pulling on my swimming trunks.

"You said: 'If I don't get up, pick me up and throw me in the lagoon.'"

Penelope started straightening up my bedroom, but I sent her to wake up Kostya. He had asked me to, himself. His room was next door, and I could hear the robot's mumbling, then Kostya's sleepy voice begging her to leave him in peace. I didn't wait to see what would happen next.

Tropical verdure grew right up to the walls of our little house. I ran along a pathway through a half-dark tunnel of trees with cold dew-drops dripping from the leaves down my back. It was not more than two hundred metres to the shore of the lagoon, but it took me quite a spell to weave my way through the green labyrinth, sometimes bursting out onto a small glade where the bluish lawn was strewn with flowers, or else bumping into a net on a tennis court. Finally I crossed a bamboo grove and found myself near a diving-board tower.

When I at last made it to the top landing, breathing pretty hard, the short, cool tropic morning was just breaking. The horizon was covered with a heavy wall of grey-gold clouds. The sun's rays were bursting through cracks in the wall and striking the buoyant surface of the ocean, also golden grey. The trade wind pushed so hard against my back, I had to hold fast to the hand-rail. Down below, someone in a blue bathing cap was already swimming in the centre of the lagoon, escorted by two dolphins. Several sea primates were tearing at terrific speed towards the lagoon entrance; upon reaching a black and yellow buoy, they slowed down, turned, formed up in line and again tore ahead, this time into the lagoon. Probably they were training, getting ready for a competition.

The grey flashing bodies cut through the water in all directions.

I turned my head this way and that, trying not to miss one detail, drinking in everything that would surround us for many months: the multicoloured spots of the whale pastures, the fields planted with seaweed. I was attracted by a flock of sea-birds on the northern part of the island, and by some kind of moving spots beside the wall of clouds kindled into flame by the sun. At the lagoon entrance, I saw shimmering mother-of-pearl wings—probably a school of flying fish. The island interested me less: I took it for a gigantic structure masked as an atoll, in other words, a very simple and not extremely brilliant machine. Only much later and almost imperceptibly did the greatness and simplicity of this creation of man's genius begin to arouse my involuntary respect. But now I saw only the ocean, only the morning under the gleam and glory of Helios. The radiant god burst over the wall of burning clouds and victoriously began his climb to the zenith. During these few minutes, how well I understood the ancient poets who endowed nature with all the thrilling senses of man! I was caught up in a sensation of mingled joy and alarm, expecting something extraordinary to happen, like in childhood when I gazed at the starry sky and saw black mysterious gaps in its depths where there were other galaxies, suns, planets and, perhaps, even people.

I had completely forgotten about my friend Kostya and, meanwhile, he was swiftly climbing the ladders, pulling himself up by his hands, leaping several rungs at a time, mounting stra-

ight up as if he were weightless. It this urgency there was nothing strange—old slow-coach Kostya sometimes exhibited miraculous bursts of energy. Now he leaped on the top platform and I could see his red, sweaty face with scratches on the forehead. From his narrowed eyes, I realized something out of the way had occurred at home.

“Penelope?” I asked, trying to withhold a smile.

Kostya’s eyes flashed.

“Oho, and he can still laugh! Sicked that brainless fool on me, and grins....”

Ordinarily, I only dive from the 10-metre board, but now I jumped for the first time from the fifteenth, with no sensation of fear, my arms spread like wings.

I flew and smiled, imagining my friend’s surprised face. I rose to the surface and, looking up, I saw Kostya squatting on the board. He shook his fist and, running down to the five-metre springboard, did a triple somersault into the water.

Surfacing, Kostya had a long coughing fit, staring at me with hot impatient eyes.

“Swallowed water,” he said, his face shining, and added: “What a dive!”

Kostya is impulsive by nature, his moods change with unusual facility. But this was something new! To forgive me so soon for the scratch on his forehead, and even appreciating my dive!

“Yes, apparently my dive turned out pretty good,” I said modestly. “Only, it seems to me, I didn’t cut water too well.”

“Ha-ha! Pretty good, you say! You belly-

flopped like a flounder dropping off a cliff. But take mine, I really somersaulted. Five turns!"

"Three, and that's stretching it."

"Five! Even five and a half! And how did I cut water? Like a knife."

Three dolphins swam over to us and stopped, looking us over with big, intelligent eyes.

"Good morning!" Kostya slapped one of them on the back.

All three vanished instantly underwater, and wouldn't come near us any more.

"Feelings are hurt," grunted Kostya, swimming beside me. "What did I do that was so terrible?"

I replied that apparently they couldn't stand rough treatment or familiarity."

"That wasn't familiarity, simply a friendly pat on the shoulder," snorted Kostya, spitting water; and he quickly swam to the opposite shore.

From his tone and behaviour, one could see he was very annoyed with himself. As for me, I still retained an elated, sunny feeling. I only smiled at Kostya's bitterness. There was always something happening to him.

Probably, heredity is making itself felt, I thought, slowly swimming along the shore of the lagoon. He's always the first to suffer from his own thoughtlessness. Somehow I'll have to slip him on the sly the taped lectures of Wieslaw Solinsky, psychologist. I could, of course, give him advice myself—as if Kostya would pay attention to my suggestions! At the time, I felt I was brimming over with all possible good intentions, like a fountain or an artesian well.

I was distracted from my pedagogical ideas

by a dolphin: the little rascal poked his nose against my heels. He wasn't more than a year old, a very little dolphinette. He surfaced ten metres away, then swam alongside and splashed me. In his wake rushed a whole crowd of little mischief-makers, coming from heaven knows where, with piercing whistles.

I heard laughter behind me. Turning, I saw the wet, smiling face of the swimmer in the blue cap. He said:

"Now they're in for it. Kharita will sit them on the 'balcony' for ten minutes. You can imagine what it means for such volcanic creatures to have to stay put for even a second! But it's no joke to fool with Kharita: she's forbidden the little ones to go near two-legged creatures during their rather clumsy morning manipulations in the water. There might be trouble, and they wouldn't be to blame, naturally. We're far too awkward in their native element."

The pleasant young man in the blue cap was Petya Samoilov. With unconcealed pride, he told me that he had been working on the whale farm for two years now. As for his scientific field work, he spoke rather vaguely about it, with a slight disdain. "In between farm work, I have to loaf around in the laboratory. My theme isn't much to speak of—phytoplankton." But he spoke of the whales with enthusiasm, and even a very touching warmth.

Petya and I stood on the "balcony", where the water was only waist-high and underfoot there was a springy, porous plastic, so that the dolphins could rest on it without fear of injuring their very sensitive skins. The balcony was what Petya called it—this underwater projec-

tion from the basalt walls. It was about a kilometre long. And the shining backs of dolphins could be seen along its whole length.

"This is where they have their schools, clubs, hospitals and hotels," explained Petya. He laughed: "Look, Kharita has taken pity on the rascals."

Past us raced a school of little dolphins. This time they made a fairly wide detour around the bathing islanders: in other words, us.

"Amazing creatures!" said Petya, staring after them. "The more you get to know them, the more you realize it. The information we get from this people is of unbelievable scope, yet at the same time rather perfunctory. We are looking for similarities in the dolphins that would relate them to ourselves but, apparently, we'll have to work out a different approach, that is, try to find in them features which we lack. Do you know Chauri Singh? You'll soon get acquainted. He and Lagrange are making unusually interesting experiments with cephalopoda molluscs. Apparently, such methods are necessary to comprehend the psychology of any living being."

Petya spoke fast, without taking particular care over logical connections. He wanted to lay out everything he knew about dolphins, though most of what he said wasn't new to me.

"The young ones are particularly interesting," continued Petya. "They have only recently begun to realize their strength and abilities. Before, they had no criteria, nothing to judge themselves by. In some ways they are more developed than we, though less rational. That's because they have no arms. They travelled a more peaceful path of development. The thing is, they

never had to work too hard over getting food, so they had time left over for meditation and thinking about the world. As a result, there arose a unique speculative civilization, without a written language or the pictorial arts. Contacts with people enriched them enormously, just as our intercourse with them has enriched us. We can observe the startling changes that the most trivial things give rise to." Petya swept his arms in a wide gesture. "Nobody, for example, ever expected that this primitive accommodation, this island, would play such a tremendous role in the lives of primates of the sea. Previously, dolphins didn't have a moment's peace. There were battles with sharks, the day's hunt, great migrations. Some tribes, as you know, even had their own kind of 'animal farms'—they pastured shoals of fish, looked after feeding them, herding them to places rich in plankton. At night, even in good weather, in a dead calm, their work was no easier, perhaps even harder. Any moment there might be an attack—by killer whales, cuttle-fish, sea serpents or gigantic eels. The children slept on their mothers' fins. Grown-ups—those who weren't standing guard—only took cat-naps. It was like that all the time. And the most interesting thing is that there are primates of the sea who still prefer the former way of life and even propagate it among the youth."

Petya fell suddenly silent, looked at the black face of his watch with the golden ciphers, and then, as if checking the exactness of his electronic chronometer, squinted a glance at the sun. Giving a nod, he dived underwater. He was down so long that I was already looking around in

alarm, wondering if there had been an accident, when a hundred metres away the blue cap appeared, flanked by two dolphins.

"Hard to drown here, I might even say impossible," said Kostya sadly. He had swum over unnoticed and was perching on the edge of the balcony. "The life-guard service works to perfection. Whenever I dived, three or four guards invariably tagged after me. And I think they were disappointed when I broke surface without their help. I tried to thank them several times, start a conversation or simply make some kind of contact. But, just imagine, they acted as strangely as the one I patted on the shoulder." Kostya was silent. His face became fixedly solemn, and he raised a finger to call my attention. "D'you hear? They're coming!"

Across the water swept powerful sighs, the splash and ripple of jets of water: a herd of blue whales entered the lagoon, thirty adults and a dozen or so babies. They moved carefully around the lagoon, as if afraid of damaging our island. Bells rang out melodiously—real blows of the clapper in a copper bell, taped on magnetic wire.

"Seven o'clock!" whispered Kostya, tragically. "Run! "We're late for breakfast." They warned me that sea regulations are followed here. At seven, the dining-room stops working."

"What does that mean—sea regulations?" I asked, as I ran.

"You'll soon find out...."

What does he mean by sea regulations? I wondered, barely keeping up to Kostya. The dining-room here is better than the university's: you can order anything you want. Last night, after

gulping down a rather tasty standard supper, Kostya called a robot and whispered something in his ear microphone. The robot brought him an ancient perforating punch and a book with celluloid pages. Kostya, putting on an air of importance, quickly flipped the pages of the cook book and clicked the punch along the offset keyboard. I noticed that all the islanders remained seated after they'd finished eating; some sipped juice from tall glasses; others, not hiding their curiosity, awaited the results of Kostya's improvisation. At last, the same robot appeared holding in four hands a dish of unbelievable size.

On the dish reposed a whole roasted baby brontosaurus weighing some fifty kilograms. In the ensuing silence, the robot announced: "Side dish by personal order! Martian rabbit!"

It seemed to me that the round physiognomy of the four-handed robot broke into a malicious smile. Making a brief pause, the robot added further information: "Prepared in seven minutes and thirty-four seconds, Martian time."

Never before had there been such merriment in the dining-room where, so far as I could judge, a restrained atmosphere ruled that was typical of places of this kind.

We were surrounded, and everybody with loud laughter reached out for some "Martian rabbit". I must say that very few managed to swallow even a piece of this "Martian animal". The "rabbit's" grey-green mass was saturated with common salt and flavoured with every kind of natural and synthetic spice which Kostya had been able to find in the culinary order book. Kostya laughed louder than the rest, extremely satis-

fied with the effect he had made. True, his gaiety became slightly deflated when Nilssen appeared on the telescreen and stated with a badly concealed smile: "Would the author of the 'Martian rabbit' please come to the Central Post... when he's finished his supper, of course...."

Kostya wasn't especially talkative about this visit, only mentioning that there was an absolutely "strange order of things" on the island. And he asked me how Nilssen had found out about his tendency to make experiments in any field of science or applied art.

"And the 'Martian rabbit'?" I reminded him.

"But that was quite a special case! How could anyone make such hurried conclusions from only one example? And not a very successful one at that!"

Probably Nilssen had also used the opportunity to remind him of sea regulations.

In the cool, spacious dining-room with sliding walls, there wasn't a soul, if you didn't count the four-handed robot with the malicious mug. He moved on sound-proof roller-skates between the tables, cleaning up. Apparently, he didn't notice we were there, being wholly occupied with his work. We soon realized that all the culinary automatic equipment was shut off, and we wouldn't manage to get even a plate of oatmeal porridge or a cup of coffee.

"This is what you call sea regulations," said Kostya, giving me a triumphant glance. "If you're late for breakfast, wait for dinner; late for dinner, wait for supper! You don't find it outrageous? Taking it all round, I don't much like it here. Just look what that idiot's doing!"

Kostya nodded at the robot racing past us. "How's that for figure skating!"

Certainly, the merry robot was making complex turns, often changing direction, describing circles, twirling in one spot. Then he unexpectedly swept towards one of the transparent walls, cleverly gathering up the dirty dishes as he went and packing them into a yellow sack.

"Hey, pal!" cried Kostya. "Come over here!"

The robot turned his back.

"They specially programmed him for that," said Kostya gloomily, "before our arrival. You don't find we're being crammed to the gills with pedagogy?" He frowned. "Let's get out of here! We'll go to the whale-milkers and get a drink of fresh milk. Imagine, trying to scare us with their stiff regime...."

The lean figure of the Academician appeared at the far end of the room. He also noticed us and waved.

"Good morning, my friends," he called out, and then said something to the robot. The latter slowed down and skated over to him.

"See that?" Kostya commanded, glancing at them. "What did I tell you! He is bored with human society, and even that of dolphins. He came to chat with the kitchen robot. What are they so secretive about? Where did he send the creature?"

The robot vanished through the doors, and our mysterious tutor approached us, showing marvellous false teeth in a broad grin. There couldn't be two opinions on this account—he had ordinary standard dentures, just like my grandfather's.

"Well, well," he said, eyes narrowing with

amusement. "An army marches on its stomach. I remembered that forgotten saying and set off to look for my students."

Kostya snorted. "For the last two days, all we've done is listen to maxims and moral lectures; as a result, we know them to a 'T'. The whole kit and kaboodle of them."

"Oh, anyone could see that. Remarkable progress," said Pavel Mefodevich, not the least offended. I think he even liked Kostya's rudeness.

Suddenly, Kostya underwent a real metamorphosis. His face brightened up with an inner light, his eyes shone.

Loaded down with food, the robot was solemnly approaching a table. Three hands held full plates, the fourth a tray bearing glasses of amber fruit juice chilled with ice.

Our tutor laughed silently, rubbing his hands with satisfaction.

"Well, that's ended, or we may suppose it will end with everybody happy. Please sit down. Hold on, fellow," he spoke to the robot. "Careful there and don't break anything. Now you may go about your business."

We didn't wait to be asked twice. Pavel Mefodevich drank a little juice from his glass, but touched nothing else. With open delight, he watched us demolish our breakfast. The robot went on with his interrupted work, but in his movements you could clearly notice a certain restraint.

Pavel Mefodevich enjoined us to be quick about getting into the way of life on the island, and gradually "pumped" us as to our inclinations. Then he noticed we were watching the robot.

"An odd example, isn't he?" the Academician remarked. "He represents an absolutely new type. He not only perfects his knowledge in the course of his work, and in the society of human beings but, as you see, he tries to complicate his activity, enrich it with elements of creativity."

"One of the boys fed it to him during the programming," said Kostya.

"On the contrary, there's no given programme at all. Moreover, his movements continually change but, if you've noticed, they are always subordinate to his main task—his assigned work. While working, he amuses himself. He is able to find pleasure in doing dull, uninteresting work. A rare trait, even for an intelligent creature."

Meanwhile, the robot had filled his yellow sack with soiled dishes, sent it down the garbage chute, and with dancing steps was moving along the wall.

The Academician rose.

"Run, boys. Run for your life! That wretch is up to no good."

We had hardly crossed the threshold, when the walls closed, the doors slammed, and the sound of running water reached our ears: the robot had begun "hosing down the premises".

Our names were included in the island's staff, and each of us received a "Pandora's box" (that's what they call the "emergency reminder") in the shape of a tiny container. It could be worn in place of a watch on the wrist, pinned to your clothes, or simply put in your pocket. It had one remarkable peculiarity—it couldn't be lost. You had only to drop it, and it would start sending

out signals to the Central Post, and from there the unfortunate owner, with everyone listening, was advised of the lost article's location. In all the time we were on the island, only Kostya was cunning enough to once lose his "Pandora's box" so that no one could find it; nor has it been found up to now. It would be hard to find a more suitable name for this remarkable device. Like the legendary Pandora's box, it really contained a mass of unpleasant surprises. Just picture being awakened in the middle of the night and ordered to run to a jet-boat or the hydroplane Kolymaga (The Slow Coach) to start out on a hunt, through rain or storm, after a whale who had got the idea of swimming to the Antarctic; or else sent to repair the signal buoys broken by the ruffians of Black Jack's gang. Indeed, anything could happen in the ocean and on the island in our time, when the world was still full of puzzles and surprises!

We spent several hours a day in the labs. The scientific tutor of our field practice had worked out for us a very wide programme of research, research which hadn't been anticipated for our class field work that summer.

"There, in your university, it's only child's play, but this is a place for real creative work," said Pavel Mefodevich, noticing our dissatisfied grimaces. "Here's a list of books, magnetic tapes, films. Look through them in your leisure time. These are the very minimum...."

We caught our breath when we saw this "minimum".

"The root of knowledge is always bitter," our mentor solemnly uttered, by way of consolation. He especially annoyed us by demanding supreme

accuracy in analyses, and wouldn't permit us to use modern apparatuses to facilitate our work.

"All that will come later, when you've gained an understanding of what it's all about. All these lightning-fast analysing machines wean a person away from thinking, from looking into the processes, into the very heart of the experiment being staged."

Kostya sizzled. But not, naturally, in the presence of the Academician.

"Such barbarity! In our times, to use the methods of alchemists! To waste so much time!" he exploded.

We confused the reagents, broke the fragile laboratory vessels. And a strange thing happened: soon we were as fascinated as children. Kostya began to sing and whistle while he worked, a sign of growing self-satisfaction. And, all of a sudden, one day he returned from our teacher who had made a check-up of his analyses, hardly able to restrain the joy bubbling inside him. He tossed his notebook onto the desk.

"That cursed old man!" he said, tenderly. "He found that my conclusions were more accurate than those of the electronic lab assistant. Mefodevich finds, and I fully agree with him, that creative principles are incredibly difficult to programme. Though he personally refutes such a vindication. But, no matter if he's a robot three times over, I never yet came across a more perfect intellect!" Kostya laughed, and tapped me on the shoulder. "Well, and how goes it with you?"

So far, I had nothing to boast of. True, I had made some interesting observations, but they demanded tedious research and, above all, took

time. The sea lilies (crinoids: lily-shaped echinoderm, including sea-urchins) on which I was making exploration, promised many surprises.

VIEW FROM THE TOWER

The ocean had dropped off to sleep. It was a hot evening, and the trade-wind scarcely breathed. The twenty-metre wheels of the wind turbines moved so slowly one could count their gleaming blades. In the west hung a mother-of-pearl wall, all of it flickering and washed with iridescence. Somewhere beyond that opalescent wall, "Adele" was dying out (by old tradition cyclones are always given feminine names). All day the meteorological jet planes kept taking off from our island, aimed at the eye of the whirlwind, the heart of "Adele". In vain, it struggled to break away, burst from under the well-aimed blows; but it didn't have enough power. By the time the cyclone reached us, it was pretty well broken down after the air bombardment and working-over it got from the water-vapour condensers.

Kostya and I were sitting under a silicon bell-shelter on top of the watch tower. Or rather, I sat and Kostya stood, watching the iridescent wall, smiling at something or other, drumming his fingers against the thick, transparent walls of the shelter. The bell-shelter swayed gently to and fro, fully creating the impression that we were suspended in the gondola of a training aerostat for parachute jumping. It was good but a bit frightening to be dangling there, sixty metres up.

The colours of the mother-of-pearl wall were reflected in the ocean. Some three miles away flashed the dark backs of the whales feeding in the plankton fields. The dolphins were returning to the island after their sentry-duty shift at the blue whale enclosures and the fish hatcheries. On the way, the dolphins started some kind of merry game resembling tag. In the lagoon below (the tower stood on its right wing), dolphins also swam about. You could clearly see them bunch together in the transparent waters, form a complex line-up and then all dash forward simultaneously, only to scatter and then begin it all over again.

"Water-polo players," said Kostya, yawning. "They are playing with our team today. Terrifically interesting creatures. I just got acquainted with one called Proteus. He swam up to me and said something that I couldn't make out. Later, I figured that he was greeting me in English. I put my hand on his back, and said, 'Hello, old fellow'. And he replied—truly, not very clearly—something like 'Pleased to meet you'."

"In English?"

"Don't laugh. Proteus knows Russian, too. When we were swimming in the ocean, he suddenly squeaked very distinctly in Russian: 'Go back. Danger!'"

"And was something really threatening you?"

"Medusae! Purple stinging jelly-fish! A colossal swarm of them. Now they've been carried away by the current, but at noon you must have seen for yourself how red the water was from those poisonous slugs. Didn't you ever get stung? I must say the sensation isn't awfully pleasant...."

A guilty smile crept over Kostya's face and, as was his habit, he began philosophizing on a theme that had absolutely nothing to do with getting to know Proteus.

"During the last fifty years, mankind has done very much; in fact, more than in the previous two thousand. Naturally, this dialectical leap was being prepared for centuries, but man, the creator of all this," he swept his arms in an encompassing arc, "hasn't changed a bit. At least, not so you'd notice it. And our anthropologists assure us that man won't change much for the next forty thousand years! Aren't you shocked by such a paradox? Oh no, you're something like the cavemen. Precisely that, cavemen! You're not at all surprised at the fact that if we threw away all the achievements of civilization won by the progressive world, we would be practically the same."

I kept silent. When Kostya started to philosophize, he was in no need of opponents.

"Yes, the same," my friend laughed sarcastically. "And now life's not what it was. It's stale so to say. It's as if we'd lost something. What if it's a reaction, after so many centuries of intensive struggle? A struggle we know nothing about, but a struggle nonetheless. Perhaps our senses have become dulled. And we don't live the really full life that our forefathers did! I've never heard of modern chronicles like those in the old books. How many unsolved problems there were then! Everything was puzzling, shrouded in mystery. Conditions have changed, you say? Incidentally, how do you like Vera?"

I said that I didn't see any connection between his story about getting to know Proteus, his

deeply thought-out lamentations over the threatening lag in the development of mankind, and his concluding question.

Kostya wasn't in the least put out.

"Well, you see," he said, squinting, "everything in life is interconnected—we were taught that even in kindergarten. I asked you about Vera because, sometimes, in spite of your scepticism, you come up with fairly accurate opinions."

"She's a looker, and possibly very clever...."

"You doubt that she's clever!... If you want to know, she took the third place in the competition for students' works at her faculty!"

Kostya flew into a temper, began accusing me of looking down on people, of being egocentric, and even said I was an incorrigible cynic. He finished his tirade with another sudden turn-about, now refuting his statement about the "dullness of life".

"How complicated it all is, just the same," he said. "To think that we are still dependent upon mere chance! Sometimes, just meeting a person—one person out of tens of millions—can change the perfect reckoning of your life's orbit...."

This was followed by a sigh, and a glance at the evening sky, up where Biata's sputnik was shining.

At this moment, Kostya was probably feeling sorry for Biata, and awkward because he was attracted to another girl.

"I'll have to leave you," he continued. "You know, of course, that I've been taken on the command staff of the Central Post as a reserve. On the whole, this third watch isn't so bad;

you'll be able to concentrate, alone, close to the stars. Well, guess I'll go down to Earth.... Say, look there! The dolphins' father and teacher has shown up! See how he waves his arms? I haven't seen him all day: he went bustling off somewhere on his jet-boat surrounded by a retinue of sea primates. The fellows say that he reads the dolphins lectures of an evening. There's something about him I don't get! Can he be one of the first biological robots? If so, then he was certainly ideally programmed. He knows absolutely everything ... only, sometimes—for appearances' sake, I think—he pretends he can't remember something, copying a man of his years. But what a temperament! You know, I'm beginning to like him. In my opinion, that's what a real man should be like!... Luck on your watch!"

Kostya entered the lift to go down, and I was left alone.

From this height, the island looked like a tiny atoll. The widest part faced north-west; there, looming over the green verdure, rose the wind turbines transforming the force of the trade-wind into electric power. The island was made of cast basalt blocks. It was held in place by mooring anchors, was steady as a rock, and yet there was nothing to distinguish it from a very ordinary float. Day and night in its depths, factories worked to process plankton, fish, whales' milk, and to extract rare elements dissolved in sea water.

From below you could hear a range of sounds, strange to the ear of a true urbanite: squeals, puffing and panting, splashing, whistling, sharp blows on the surface of the lagoon. The water-

polo game started off with a dolphin attack on the Islanders' goal and, apparently, they cheered each other on with their own, odd-sounding cries. The advantage was clearly on the side of the dolphins. Though the Islanders often broke the rules, the ball continually flew into their net. I had a good view of the torpedo-shaped bodies of the dolphins as they flashed through the blue water, leaving behind a silvery wake of air bubbles.

Our Islanders' team had recently won first place at competitions in Sydney, Australia. The striped ball, which the dolphins were now passing from nose to nose, was the prize of the Big Games. Again our goalie, and not for the first time, threw it out of the goal mouth. Finally, one of the dolphin forwards made a mistake and, losing the ball, vanished underwater as if ashamed of his failure. The whole team followed his example, even their goalie. Our fellows chased the ball towards the deserted net! Suddenly, barring its path, a wall of dolphins shot simultaneously out of the water. They not only outplayed their rivals, they were even "laughing" at them.

Nevertheless, despite the clear hopelessness of all their efforts to win or draw, or even get one goal, the Islanders kept on attacking.

Suddenly the game stopped. The dolphins swam to the opposite side of the lagoon where Academician Polikarpov stood, surrounded by visitors.

From the tower a marvellous vista lay before me. Sitting in the chair, I could swing round in a whole 360-degree circle, admire the smooth surface of the water, and still watch the instruments.

Very complex processes went on in the ocean which appeared so still: there, invisible waves stormed, currents rose and fell, the salinity and the temperature of the water changed as cold layers suddenly rose to the surface. All these data came to me from the electronic signal buoys, mounted at different depths.

At times, on the acoustic locator screens there flashed blue dashes—these were sentry dolphins guarding the pasture borders protected by force fields. A dash on the screen grew bigger and stretched out into one line. Suddenly, the frame of one screen was flooded with a yellow light, from the loudspeaker crackled the voice of the automatic device mounted on a signal buoy: “A school of grampuses have appeared in sector 32-B”.

The grampuses, or killer whales, those freedom-loving inhabitants of the ocean, behaved like the mountaineers of the Caucasus or the North American Indians in olden times. Among them were both peaceful and unsubdued tribes. To all appearances, these grampuses were not taking any aggressive action, so far. They travelled parallel to the force fields that defended the pastures of tuna fish and mackerel. The dolphins followed the same course.

At first, I thought these killer whales were scouts from Black Jack's gang, searching for a breach in the barriers. But, judging by their quiet passage, this assumption was hardly feasible. Pirate scouts wouldn't have headed straight for the “surprise”: they knew only too well all the traps laid for simpletons. And these moved right along, with no intimation of trouble, towards a bright-green dot—the acoustic whip.

Now the grampuses were two hundred metres from the buoy, a hundred, fifty.... Suddenly. their even formation broke in confusion, and on the screen burst a green spray: to save themselves from the blows of the ultrasound whip, the grampuses stepped up their speed to no less than fifty miles an hour.

I wrote down their appearance in the watch log though this event, like everything that went on around us, was fixed on magnetic tape.

...While I was making my entry in the log, the short tropic twilight broke off. That tireless worker, the trade-wind, now rested, again turned the wheels of the wind turbines. The foamy crests of the waves were outlined by a greenish blue radiance.

Across the black firmament and in the midst of the Milky Way, sailed the constellations. Sailed is the word: because the wind rocked my gondola and it seemed as though all the heavenly firmament had been set in motion. As if some cosmic trade-wind blew there—the eternal wind of the universe.

The Ship (Volans—the keel) spread invisible sails. The Bird of Paradise (or Pavo, the Peacock) circled around the Southern Cross. Like a yellow topaz, the disc of the astronomical sputnik shone overhead. It hung motionless at a height of 36,000 kilometres. Biata was also there now, probably keeping watch at the counter of elementary particles, or else admiring the Earth; though, more than likely, she was staring into the black depths of the universe towards the sector where the Supernova must flare up. From that part of the galaxy, growing with every moment, a magic rain of unseen particles was

falling. Each second, hundreds of billions of neutrino particles were piercing every square centimetre of the universe, tearing through stars and planets, through everything alive, just as easily as if they were passing through a vacuum.

Kostya's grinning face appeared on the video-phone.

"Are you thinking of spending this glorious night like Simeon the Pole-Sitter?" he asked. "It's sixteen minutes since your time ran out for productive time-wasting up the pole."

"So why have you been loafing about down there all this time?"

"For two reasons. First, because the night watches are carried out, as everyone knows, at the Central Post; and second, I am carrying out my duties here as assistant to the watch responsible for the island and its vicinity. By the way, the Academician has gone to chat with his aqua-friends. Actually, there was no need to go pole-sitting. That service was specially created for fledglings. Come down from the cloudy heights. There's a tennis tournament on in the gym. Once you weren't at all bad with the raquet. Wait..." Kostya adopted a stagey pretense that he'd just remembered a small matter of little importance. "Almost forgot to tell you, I just talked with Biata. She's holding out pretty well, but a bit tired. All wrapped up in the Supernova! She talked of nothing else, and even more about the superneutrino fallout or, as she now calls them, the great grandparticles—which they've set their traps for up there. No, sir. Considering everything, it's a good thing that you and I are on this lovely isle. She gave you her best. Shsh! The old man's coming back. No time

to talk with even a best friend!" Kostya faded out.

I envied his being on duty with Pavel Mefodevich. I was growing ever more interested in this mysterious person. And the fact that Kostya had already spoken with Biata made me unexpectedly glad: now, no one stood between Biata and me. I clutched the disc in my hand. What hopes I put on our tele-meeting!

WHALE MILKING

Cow whales are milked twice a day—at seven in the morning and five in the afternoon. An ultrasound signal is sent out from the watch tower, and the herd moves from the pastures into the lagoon, accompanied by their dolphin herders. There's no real need for the signal: whales and dolphins are amazingly exact in determining time in any weather. As for the signal, I think that nobody pays any attention to it. For it has been working automatically now, for many years.

Every cow whale goes to her "stall", or mooring, and stops about five metres from the wall. She's not against scratching her side on the rough basalt. But, after a few unfortunate accidents, when some whales scraped pieces of skin off, the mammals were forbidden to go near the wall, and the dolphins keep a sharp eye on them.

Our Matilda is like a submarine, one of the latest models. She belongs to the blue whale species, and weighs 210 tons. Long ago, in olden times, when whales were mercilessly destroyed, rare specimens of the blue whale scarcely rea-

ched 130 to 150 tons. Few of these giants lived to a ripe old age. But now, after the universal law was passed forbidding whale-hunting, and especially after moving the whales to "pastures", this species has increased in weight by 25 per cent. In our herd, there is one whale, Malyutka (Baby), who has attained the monstrous weight of 285 tons.

Pressed close to our Matilda's flipper is her son, Hector. In twenty-four hours, the little one drinks several dozen litres of milk, and still his mother has plenty left over.

Kostya and I wear the Robb masks of silicone rubber. A film, ten microns thick, fits tightly over the frame of the mask, and performs the work of artificial lungs through which there is free entry of the oxygen dissolved in the water, while the carbon dioxide gas passes out as if through pores. However, the latter process takes place more slowly and, therefore, the mask contains a special valve for fast removal of water vapour and carbon dioxide. The Robb mask is designed for swimming or skin-diving ranging from surface level down to a depth of 20 metres, but not lower. At present, we are wearing our masks pushed back on our heads.

Today is clean-up day for the whales. We walk about on the wide back of Matilda with electric brushes and plastic shovels, and scrub her immense spine to remove the film of diatomaceous algae deposits. Apparently, Matilda gets enormous pleasure out of the operation: she freezes stock-still and barely moves her flippers. From time to time, her breathing spout gives out a powerful clap, as if a compressor valve had burst open. Matilda has a brand mark on her

back: Neptune with trident plus a number. While Kostya and I strut about on her back, Petya Samoilov and the Vietnamese Kao Ki do the milking.

Along the transparent hoses of the milking-machine runs a thick yellow jet of whale's milk. A control-meter on the mooring wall registers the decalitres. The milk goes into the depths of the island, where it is sterilized and packed into portable pressed-paper containers. Few food products on earth can even slightly approximate the amazing properties of this concentrate of energy.

It is hard to believe there was a time when whales were killed for their meat, blubber, and whalebone. Not so much because it was inhuman, but for its lack of common sense. To destroy, even according to ancient ideas, a whole factory of this "elixir of health", a factory capable of functioning for dozens of years and requiring the very minimum of care on the part of man. When I think about this, I always remember a favourite expression of Pavel Mefodevich: "Expediency is the height of justice...."

But how much effort it required on the part of all mankind for this simple truth—which could only lead to good—to become a law of life! The social system of the whole planet had to be changed, all the great discoveries of the last century had to be established on a grand scale, and communist ethics consolidated....

Kostya sat on Matilda's dorsal fin, as if on a mooring post, and began teaching Proteus the "Jolly Fishermen" song. Though a bit flat, he whistled the blithe air. Proteus listened attentively, sticking his head out of the water. Matil-

da's skin was as springy as rubber, of a bluish grey colour. Her back was almost clean. Working with the brush, I also approached the fin. Kostya laughed his head off when Proteus repeated the tune.

The dolphin's voice was squeaky and sharp, the timbre reminded you of old-style automatic readers. Proteus liked the song, his eyes gleamed, and his cunning face expressed complete satisfaction with his unusual musical talent.

But there was no further time for music. We put on our masks and dived in—we had to run the brushes over Matilda's sides and belly.

A bluish light poured through the goggles. The whale's side gleamed like marble. Below the waterline, Matilda's skin was in almost ideal shape. I swam slowly along, working only with the shovel, and sending to the depths the small clusters of acorn barnacles. Overhead was the great sickle-shaped flipper, which gave a nervous start when I touched the white spot beneath it.

Probably, at this moment, Matilda was closing her eyes like a cat having its ears scratched.

Petya Samoilov swam up with two dolphins. His distorted and squeaky voice came through the hydrophone.

"A record milking today—1800 litres! What are you hiding under the flipper for, like a nursing baby? Start giving her face a beauty treatment. Your guide during this responsible operation will be Tavi here. You can converse with him by telegraphic code, but don't forget that your guide receives visual images as well as sound signals."

I told him self-confidently that telepathic exchange of info would suit me better.

Petya snorted mockingly, and swam off with his dolphin.

I treaded water, gazing at Tavi. I was struck by his bulging forehead, and the ironical gleam in his eyes. He looked me over, too, also holding a motionless pose. Apparently, he expected something from me, but couldn't wait and impatiently uttered a lengthy phrase in a swishing whisper. Not understanding a word, I, in turn, tried to transmit a message by telepathy. Tavi took my try to make contact in a rather surprising way. He suddenly gave out a series of sounds with such force that it seemed as though a whole cannonade of artillery hit my ear. Apparently realizing the impression this loud "phrase" made upon me, he spoke again in a sort of tender, swishing whisper. Again I drew a blank, but felt that he had good intentions. So I had no recourse but to change over to the primitive Morse code, and tapped my fingers on his back.

"My name is Ivan."

In answer, he whistled a series of dots and dashes so fast that they fused into one long crackle of sound. I shook my head.

He caught on, and whistled distinctly.

"Swim after me, Ive."

That's how our acquaintance began, which very quickly grew into friendship. Many days later, I asked him why he had called me Ive the first time and not Ivan. 'Because you think the first syllable of the name denoting you is nicer,' he answered.

We swam side by side, exchanging simple information, quite pleased with each other. Tavi found a colony of acorn barnacles and I dived

beneath and neatly cleaned them off with the scraper.

In a quarter of an hour, we had Matilda all dolled up. And throughout, Tavi only surfaced once to take in air. My mask worked faultlessly, absorbing from the water the amount of oxygen necessary for breathing.

The water was slightly cool, very clear, tinged with tones of ineffable bluish grey. Below, the depths were faintly cloudy, and a look into the deeps aroused an eerie feeling that lured you down into the mysterious twilight; but you had only to raise your eyes and the peaceful, joyous colours of the living sea chased away the obsession.

"Finished!" whistled Tavi.

I did not surface. I wanted to stay underwater a bit longer. I swam, scarcely moving my fins. Over the hydrophone I heard Kostya's voice.

"I'm sure our Matty would take first prize at a beauty contest."

Somebody answered him, but I couldn't make out the words, as the sound signal was directed away from me. Besides, vague noises interfered, as if something was squeaking, somebody was breathing heavily, gurgling, softly clapping hands.

Tavi kept near my right shoulder, slipping through the dense water with effortless ease.

"What are those noises?" I tapped out on his back.

"The whales are talking," he answered at once. "Nobody in the ocean is more of a chatter-box than a whale."

"Do you know their language?"

"The language isn't the main thing, you have to see their talk."

"The whales are far away, how can you see them?"

"I see them. Not with my eyes. I see what they're talking about. I see the objects of their talk."

"You read their minds?"

"I see their thoughts." Tavi looked at me, seemingly in surprise at my stupidity.

"What are they talking about?"

"Different things. Mothers boasting about their children. Passing on the news."

"What kind of news? What do you see now?"

"Our island from a far distance. Great blue whales. Killer whales. The blue whales are afraid for their children. Now I see people in jet-boats and my brothers. The killer whales are swimming away, the people and my brothers are chasing them. To speak silently is quite easy, simple." Tavi kept looking at me, his eyes smiling encouragement.

I tried to concentrate, and it seemed as if vague images floated before my eyes. It only seemed that way. The fantastic blending of light and shadow, my eyes not being used to the gamut of colour as well as weariness, momentarily gave me the illusion of receiving the "visual language" of whales.

"Now they're talking about the Giant Squid, their...." Not finishing, Tavi flew to the surface for a lungful of air.

I also surfaced and, removing my mask, looked at the whales for the first time from an absolutely different viewpoint. Even so, my mind refused to accept the fact that those live slabs

of flesh were now carrying on lazy conversations about their affairs, perhaps gossiping, or worrying over the fate of their children. It took a great deal of real effort on my part to believe Tavi. It took even longer to firmly convince myself of this revolutionary idea. Until now, the great blue whale had been looked upon as an animal standing lower than the ape in intelligence. Probably, the atavistic picture of man's exclusive superiority over the animal kingdom is still deeply seated in us—a misconception that for thousands of years justified man's crimes against his minor brothers.

While Tavi and I had been talking under water, an event occurred on the surface that agitated all the inhabitants of the island.

When I surfaced, a powerful voice magnified by a megaphone hit my ears. The guard on duty was speaking, striving to keep his presence of mind.

"Trainee Fedorov! Dive twenty metres down, and leave the zone occupied by the whales. Avoid the 'little ones'. Obey Proteus in everything.... It's too soon, can't you see there are three 'youngsters' near you!"

I swiftly clambered up the mooring wall, and got the full picture. The whale herd was leaving the lagoon for the pastures: the mothers moved proudly, making no more than four knots; the young calves frisked around their parents.... "The little ones" jumped half out of the water and flopped back on the green surface, raising a cascade of spray, then dived. Came the characteristic squealing of the old whales. A rainbow stood over the herd. Straining my eyes, I tried to locate Kostya in the water, imagining him being

run down and crushed by the herd. Suddenly, I saw my friend standing amid foam and spray on Matilda's head. She held it higher above the water than the other whales. Did she possibly realize the danger Kostya was in?

"Jump!" roared the guard into the megaphone.

Surfacing far out from the herd, Kostya clambered aboard Proteus and rode him to the island. Again the powerful voice rang over the ocean. Now the guard was caustically ticking Kostya off for breaking the rules of ethics in relation to sea primates.

"Young man," he said in conclusion. "You must never abuse the friendship of our marine brothers."

Reddening, panting, Kostya climbed out of the water, and I was the first one he vented his anger on.

"Well, what are you laughing at? Glad you found a butt for stupid jokes?"

"I don't find it a bit funny..."

"A-ah, you're afraid I've compromised you? Right?"

He soon cooled down, and transferred his fire from me to the rest of the islanders.

"Where've we got to? Bunch of goodie-goods! This is worse than a reform school for juvenile delinquents. No, thanks. I've had enough! I'll catch the first hydroplane out. So, good-bye!" And he walked quickly over to a trainee who had pulled up a dragnet from the bottom of the lagoon. It held a lobster, a hermit crab, a few starfish and a host of small creatures.

Tavi swam over to the wall.

"Enter the transparent shell," he whistled.

I was standing not far from the grey, plastic booth which held an obsolete electronic device for direct communication with dolphins.

This old cyber-machine had a weakness for flowery expressions. The LC-8006 was soon to take its place.

"This is a better way of putting questions and receiving answers," rang the machine's harsh voice, translating Tavi's words.

I agreed with him, and asked:

"So what were the whales saying about the squids?"

"About the Giant Squid," Tavi corrected me.

"Why do the squids interest them, even if they are big? After all, they don't eat squids." I heard something like laughter.

"The Giant Squid can't be eaten."

I agreed that it would be hard going to eat large squids and that only cachalots could cope with such a difficult task.

"No, cachalots eat ordinary squids. Nobody can eat the Giant Squid. He is lord of the deeps. Man is lord of the sky and the daylight. The Giant Squid is lord of the deeps and the nights."

It had a romantic flavour. The Giant Squid was like the mysterious god of the sea in ancient legends.

"The Giant Squid," Tavi continued, "meant to take a tiny whale last night."

"What tiny one?"

"The one born yesterday. The Giant Squid knows all."

"He didn't get away with it, I hope?"

"The brothers of the sea noticed him. The large whales went out to meet him."

"Did they give him a sound thrashing?"

"I don't understand."

"Did they beat him?"

"He can't be beaten. He's the Giant Squid."

I asked why Tavi felt such respect for the cuttle-fish, yet the whales did not forgive him for his bandit ways.

"He doesn't want to meet up with the great blue whales," answered Tavi. "All other inhabitants of the sea don't want to meet up with the Giant Squid."

"Well, I can see that. Tell me, is your Giant Squid very big?"

"I don't understand."

"What size is he? Bigger than a whale?"

"He's not big; he's the Giant Squid!"

I spent some time trying to find out by what means they knew of his approach. Why did the whales rush out to meet the cuttle-fish in defence of their newborn child, without seeing the enemy?

Either Tavi gave confused explanations or else the cyber-machine could not cope with the translation but, whichever it was, it took me a quarter of an hour before I finally managed to guess that Tavi was speaking of a second "vision"—sound location—and a completely incomprehensible "sense" which was something like the faculty of telepathic communication.

One way or another, the approach of the Giant Squid had not gone unnoticed and, apparently, some living creatures rose to defend themselves while others resignedly became the monster's victims.

And Tavi told me another piece of news. The whales knew about the appearance of Black

Jack and his last murder. News travels fast in the ocean. Tavi surprised me by saying that the previous evening Black Jack's spies had approached our force field, and vanished when they ran into the "acoustic whip". And I had written in the watch log about the appearance of "peaceful" grampuses in our waters!

THE INVASION

A whole week has passed since we came to live on the floating island—or rather, it has flown by—but thanks to the profusion of impressions it seems as if we had lived here for ages. Kostya has become utterly ecstatic over our "float" and the whales, the dolphins, morning dip, sudden alerts, and his research on the contents of rare metals in the cells of sea animals. He has said nothing more about an immediate jet-off, nor uttered a word against orders or the heartlessness of the islanders. He is obviously proud of having so quickly got used to sea regulations. Something like that happened to me, too. Now, neither of us could picture up any other place on earth that would suit us so well, on all counts.

Right in front of Pavel Mefodevich, Kostya said that he felt as though he had turned up on another planet, and that our island was simply a ship flying somewhere up there.... And he looked at the sky.

Polikarpov rubbed his hands together.

"An amazingly true comparison, my boy. The same thing has struck me more than once. What a lot of things around us to be explored! How many mysteries! Truly, it is just as if we

had landed on a planet in the system of Sirius, or Vega."

He clapped Kostya on the back. He clearly liked my somewhat mercurial friend. He acted rather restrained with me and, I would say, in a sort of wait-and-see manner. Though several times I noticed a look of approval in his eyes when he was looking through the notes on my experiments.

After supper, all the islanders would spend the evening on a large verandah overhanging the ocean. But we four—Petya Samoilov, Kao Ki, Kostya and I—usually dropped into this local club only for the sake of propriety, and then hurried to the jet-boat dock to go for a scoot round the island with the inevitable dolphin escort. The wind whistled in our ears. A fiery green wake spread out behind the stern. The dolphins' bodies also gleamed when they shot through the waves to take short cuts and burst ahead of us. How complacent they were when they broke into the lagoon first, putting human engineering to shame!

But last night, trying to mask a triumphant smile behind a deliberately serious mien, Kostya suggested a change.

"Come to my den for a minute, fellows. I spoiled two hundred metres of film. But I think I managed to shoot something useful for our descendants. Soon I'll be as good as Corrington, and our old man, too."

None of us were tempted by the prospect of spending the very nicest part of the day within four walls, and having to look at an amateur film, besides. We were far too anxious to go scooting across the sleepy ocean in a jet-boat.

But Kostya added: "Come on, fellows, it won't take more than ten minutes, and then we'll lather the ocean."

In his "den" he had everything ready to show the film. The "Pygmy" projector stood dark on its tripod with the lens aimed at a large screen. We sprawled on the rug and soon forgot about scooting in a jet-boat. Kostya proved to be a talented cameraman. He had filmed the island from different angles: especially good were those he shot from the lighthouse and the helicopter.

The film began with the rising sun. Out of a violet sea rose a deep crimson disc. Where had he got such lighting from, such a delicate, graceful orb of heaven? A feeling of surprise caught us. It was as if we stood before the canvas of an artist who had created something unique and inimitable out of a simple view seen an endless number of times. There lies the task and eternal mystery of art.

Never before had I seen such an ocean, such a sun, such a herd of whales. The giants were feeding on a milky-blue rolling plain. But I think the most interesting shots were of the lectures of Pavel Mefodevich. He stood on a small platform overhanging the water, speaking into the hydrophone. Below, no less than two hundred dolphins were gathered. They had taken different poses in the water and were listening to the lecture with great interest. Probably, the transformer of human speech gave the dolphins the all-sound impression that the lecturer spoke their own language, though with mistakes and in a terrible accent. At times, a typical racket broke out: whistles and lip smacking, expres-

sions of delight or disapproval by the audience. Then silence would fall once more. To the speaker's right, on the screen for day-time demonstrations, a documentary film was being shown about the life of a modern city.

"I was pretty lucky to get those shots," said Kostya. "The old man twice interrupted his lecture and threatened to ask the dolphins to dunk my camera. Can you imagine my predicament? I was bouncing among them in an inflatable boat and, judging by their looks, they would have been glad to take him at his word. I'm afraid you would have never seen the film, if I hadn't sworn that I was taking it only for a narrow circle of friends, and that not one shot would appear on the world newsreel. For some reason, he's afraid of popularity. There's another puzzle for you about this mysterious personality...."

Kostya's chatter and the film were interrupted by the guard on duty, the ecologist Lagrange. He appeared on the telescreen, rosy and smiling, and excused himself for interrupting us in our free time. Then, trying to put on a stern look, he announced that a break had occurred in the power system supplying the loading machinery.

Kostya and I exchanged glances.

This did not escape the sharp eyes of Lagrange. Squinting at us, he gave a sigh of regret, nodded and vanished.

"Strange fellow, that Lagrange," said Kostya. "Why did he report the matter to us? If it's the truth, then why are the "Pandora boxes" silent? Apparently, there's nothing to it. In five minutes, the robot-electricians will repair the break. Let's continue. Now you'll see some underwater masterpieces."

Petya Samoilov was watching us with some interest.

"Are you thoroughly acquainted with your duties?"

Again we exchanged glances.

"I think so," replied Kostya.

"Not quite. Lagrange is right. Let's go, and be quick about it. The refrigerator ships must leave on time, otherwise the factories will have to shut down."

On the way he explained that all three of us were in one of the repair crews, and that the island didn't yet have robots capable of repairing breaks in the power supply system.

"In general, up to now, there's been no need of such specialized robots—everything here works very reliably. Follow me."

He led us through a gloomy alley. Glow-worms hurtled past us, with a threatening buzz. The aroma of orchids came in great gusts.

Petya turned into a scarcely noticeable pathway, and we found ourselves in a grove of coconut palms.

Everything was all right here: the cable gleamed evenly and that meant it was intact.

It was only then I noticed that a narrow, faintly phosphorescent strip stretched through the grass. All round us, something rustled and clacked. Kostya switched on his pocket torch. Scurrying through the grass went a multitude of crabs with bright yellow shells and huge orange claws; their beady eyes bulged out on long stems like the antennae of visitors from outer space. The "visitors" were chewing crunchingly away at the juicy blades of grass.

"First time I saw land crabs like these!" said

Petya Samoilov. "It is usual for little ones to come out of the ocean, but these.... They have an amazing eye structure."

Not far away a coconut smacked on the ground, then another.

"Coconut thieves," said Kostya. "Run, or else...."

As if affirming his fears, the next nut fell between us.

When we had safely jumped out of the danger zone, Petya continued.

"Some kind of new species. Where did they come from? And besides, there's far too many of them all over. Probably they hide in holes in the daytime. Look! They're gorging themselves on the pineapples! No, sir. They're not at all like our usual coconut thieves."

"This species is universal," Kostya remarked with a smirk. "They eat nuts and pineapples, too."

Petya aimed his torch at a huge crab devouring the juicy pulp of a pineapple.

"A new species!" said Petya, with a shiver in his voice. "Just you look at the shape of the shell. I came across something like it near the reefs."

"All crabs are grey when the lights are out," observed Kostya profoundly.

"And that from a naturalist! Did you hear?" Petya turned to me. "A child would know it's an utterly new species."

"Let's assume it is," uttered Kostya, coolly. "Is it worth getting so hot about? I'm not arguing. So it's a new species."

Petya was slightly hurt.

"I detect a bit of a sneer there. As if I were

talking nonsense. Don't forget I've studied crustaceans for a long time, and pretty thoroughly."

Kostya flared up abruptly.

"I don't care a rap about any arthropods or crustaceans, and less about the medusa or cuttlefish!"

Petya stood still, breathing hard and unable to get out a word.

The strange thing was, I also felt a sort of evil excitement: I was morbidly glad they were arguing. I waited to see what would follow, and gave a short, nasty laugh.

Rightly enough, Kostya found my laughter out of place, and stupid. Cutting words of abuse rose to the tip of my tongue, ready to fly out. But, suddenly, the luminous ghost of the cable was snuffed out, and we paused in astonishment though we'd expected it all along. The disagreeable excitement left me, and I felt embarrassed over my ugly thoughts.

"Well," drawled Kostya. We're certainly in a strange sort of mood to-night. Hope you'll overlook it, Petya. I'm sorry. You're absolutely right, something's not normal about the crabs. You can't put your foot down anywhere for the creatures!"

Out of the blue, we suddenly became unusually gay. Instead of fixing the break, we joined hands and started jumping up and down, laughing uproarously. The squashed shells of crabs crunched underfoot, and this also sent us off into heights of rapture, with no excuse for it.

Again we stopped abruptly, ashamed.

"We'll have to raise the cover," said Petya, almost out of breath. "Got to see what's the

matter down there." He tapped his foot on the ceramic lid sheltering the commutator.

"Should call a robot," suggested Kostya. "I've, run for your Penelope. Let her work!"

I don't know how long we would have stood there, wrangling over which of us should raise the cover, if a crab hadn't caught Kostya by the toe. He screamed, hopping on one foot; then he bent over, grabbed the cover by its ring, and flung it aside.

The crabs were swarming over the commutator. One, a raspberry colour, was motionless: its claw had got tangled in the insulation and caused a short circuit.

Kostya began screaming at Petya and me in a powerful voice, and we meekly dropped into the shallow trench and began throwing out the crabs, catching them by their hard shells or legs.

Kostya stood for a long time, watching us.

"Looks like a zero transportation line. You throw out two, and four go in," he said. "They are moving along the commutator from both ends. Some other measures should be taken. Crawl out! But fix the short circuit first."

Strangely enough, neither Petya nor I had thrown out the raspberry crab. With difficulty, I pulled the claw from the torn insulation. At the same moment, the artificial moons came on over the mooring docks. Petya had a hard time squeezing the insulation paste from the tube to mend the break. While he did it, I kept knocking the crabs off him with my foot.

"All hands on deck!" commanded Kostya. "The insulation paste has already hardened. But I won't swear they won't chew through the insulation somewhere else. Forward!"

Kostya walked swiftly towards the lagoon. He stopped, called out something and waved at us, then broke into a run. With every stride, his legs rose higher and I found out why when we ran after him: the crabs were crawling along the path, moving in a vacillating compact stream. Trying to avoid stepping on them, I also leaped high, searching for a free place to land. But each time, a dry crackle rang out underfoot.

Four yellow moons illuminated the refrigerator ships from the lighthouse tower, creating a strange turbulence of light and shadow. We ran, taking a short-cut through the bamboo grove where shadows swayed furiously in a mad dance. It seemed as if we were lost in a labyrinth from which there was no way out. I raced the last ten metres with outstretched hands, swerving between the tree trunks. The pathway had vanished long ago. Somewhere behind me, Petya Samoilov was breathing heavily.

At last, dripping with sweat, the three of us stopped at the edge of the moorings. It was a quiet, starlit night. The trade-wind scarcely moved the vanes of the wind turbines whose wheels, invisible in the darkness, gave out a soothing hum. Ordinarily, at this time, the lagoon lived its own special life. The young dolphins would frisk about playing noisy games, with no fear of hurting people or their clumsy contraptions floating in the lagoon. The adults would gather on the balcony, loudly exchanging the news while Kharita told stories to the little tots. The patrol detachments assembled in the middle of the lagoon would break into a furious start, racing for the exit. Dolphins would be gaily returning from distant posts. In a word,

the lagoon was fully at the disposal of the sea primates during these hours. But tonight, the silence in the lagoon was startling: it was as if everyone had left for good and all.

Kostya called Proteus; he should be at home, his watch for guarding the whales began at dawn. Proteus did not answer. And another utterly inexplicable thing was: the dolphin on duty had disappeared. He, at least, was always to be found in the lagoon, and would race shorewards at the first call.

For a minute, we were all silent, listening, and trying to figure out what was going on, after all.

Leaning on the railing and looking down into the water, Kostya spoke his thoughts aloud.

"Just for the record, can any of you clear up what all this means? Why did we get the idea of dancing on the crabs? Why did we run to the shore like lunatics? And on top of that, through the bamboo grove! I even had the feeling that my life depended on it. I scraped my cheek something awful, slipping between the trees. And I know that I got off lightly."

"Looks something like mass psychosis," I said.

"Mass psychosis," unexpectedly agreed Kostya, who always found some objection to my most irrefutable conclusions. "Imagine! For some reason, I wanted to jump in the water. What if it's the business of the Supernova?"

In contrast to Kostya, I usually agreed with him; at least, I did if there was a drop of common sense in his words. But this time, I thought his proposition seemed monstrously stupid, and I turned on him hotly.

Instead of parrying my attack—and he was always clever at that—Kostya silently looked at the diving tower. Petya also stared at it.

“What are you looking at?” I asked, and stopped short, feeling a cold shiver run down my wet spine.

The entire diving tower was covered with crabs. They crawled along a trail leading from the water, and mounted in a spiral to the very top landing. From there, they dropped down. They scabbled up the ladder, using the uprights, dangling, holding on by their claws to the rungs. The diving tower seemed alive. The beach beyond the tower swarmed with crabs, countless ranks came out of the water and, in close formation, moved up the sloping bank onto the island. Their wet shells gleamed dully in the moonlight.

We looked at this soundless procession as if bewitched, not knowing what measures to take. And what could we do, anyway?

Kostya was the first to break the silence.

“I’d like to know what they’re up to,” he said.

“Such migrations of crabs from water to dry land is a usual thing. But I don’t understand what attracts them to a basalt island, and a floating one at that,” put in Petya.

“Hang on, fellows,” cried Kostya, merrily. “Our repair crew will have enough work to do! Now the ‘Pandora boxes’ will start to speak.”

Suddenly the moons were turned off. Only a chain of lights glowed on the refrigerator ships and along the main alley.

“Well, what’d I tell you!” Kostya grabbed me by the shoulders. “Listen.”

From the box hanging round my neck, we could hear Lagrange's distinct voice, calling all the islanders to gather for an emergency council.

After a ten-minute meeting, we again went to the pineapple plantation. The task we faced was to guard the electric cable and clean all the zone around it from crabs. Our first job, of course, was to locate the new breaks: now the insulation was broken in three places.

The moons and the emergency projectors blazed out, cutting our eyes with unbearably brilliant light. Very soon the crabs disappeared underground. Lagrange had forgotten that we were dealing with night creatures. He had to create a "twilight". Then the crabs crawled out of their holes and began to destroy the plants and everything they could get their horny jaws into.

Penelope proved to be an irreplaceable assistant. We had brought her with us as a means of transport, and she very deftly handled containers weighing up to 300 kilograms, delivering them to the fertilizer factory. But after watching us, she soon began catching crabs herself, even pulling them from the holes, and doing it better than we—she had nothing to fear from their orange claws.

Working, we no longer experienced either excitement or depression: apparently, we had already developed immunity against the strange influence. Doubtless it was also the direct effect of a large group of people working together, and of the cheerful, rhythmic music which rang out all over the island. Our good mood returned to us, and the recent unpleasantness was forgotten. We had been working for about three hours

when suddenly Penelope failed to return from the fertilizer factory.

Kostya expressed a burning desire to set off in search of the "iron lady", but Petya Samoilov and I protested against his obvious intention of scrimshanking.

"All right," agreed Kostya, suspiciously meek, "then you two go, and leave me with the defeated but still not destroyed enemy."

Only then did I realize how cleverly I'd been caught on the hook. But there was nothing I could do. Petya wasn't familiar with the control scheme of Penelope so, accompanied by Kostya's best wishes for success, I set off to look for her.

Along the main alley leading to the industrial complex moved the robots. On the left side, they carried loads; on the right they returned with empty containers. In the semidarkness, this procession made a rather gloomy impression. Here, you were even harder hit by the human features which the designers had given the robots, by tradition.

This remarkable evening, all five senses were intensified and normal things began to look queer. I was dumbfounded to see that the robots marched in step, at an even distance, like soldiers clad in anti-ray armour. I'd seen something like it in a historical newsreel. There was nothing terrifying about the military step. The rhythm and distance had been set in order to avoid a crush while unloading the containers. I searched for our beautiful Penelope in the flood of human-shaped machines.

Most of the robots sported a greyish phosphorescent covering and garish numbers on their backs. Today, Penelope had "donned" a green

outfit. I could have spotted her at once, even in a bigger crowd.

Voices came from both sides of the alley, and I could see the flash of pocket torches. The robots with loads came out of the side-paths and poured into the common stream. I didn't find Penelope even at the receival hatch of the fertilizer plant.

There were already no crabs left along the shore. Dolphins had appeared and blocked all approaches to the island. I was going along the beach, heading for the repair workshop in hopes of finding a reserve robot with charged batteries, when all of a sudden, Tavi called out to me with a series of short, muffled whistles. This was both a greeting and an invitation to listen to some interesting information. I took the hydrophone, went down the slope to the very water, patted his flipper and asked where he had disappeared to and what had happened in the lagoon. Where had all its residents gone to?

"The Giant Squid was here!"

"Where? In the lagoon?"

"Close by. Very close!"

"And everybody ran away?"

"Everybody was here. They were all paralysed with fear."

"You don't know where he is now?"

"He's where he always is. He left. It was very terrible."

A week ago, such a statement would only have provoked me to giving an ironical smile, but now I reacted very seriously to what I'd heard and, comparing it with our own experiences, I had to admit that we'd been exposed to some kind of psychic influence, though it wasn't to be ex-

cluded that Tavi could be mistaken. The reason for it might not be the mythical Squid, but the hordes of crabs. What did we know about them? I told Tavi my doubts, and heard a long and incomprehensible tirade which must have been full of offensive irony. He did not waste time translating it, for he had in reserve another piece of important information which he couldn't wait to share with me.

It was for this he had called out to me, and I had distracted him by my naive questions and doubts. Tavi, trying to keep calm, and at a much slower speed, told me that at the bottom, under the very island, a strange creature had appeared which radiated light.

I was glad to be the first to receive such staggering news.

"Is it the Giant Squid?" I inquired.

This time, Tavi was patient. Most likely he decided, once and for all, to cure me of asking foolish questions about the "Great One", so he spent a good long time pounding into me the true nature of this mysterious personage. From all this very extensive explanation, I gathered that not one living creature in the ocean had ever seen the Giant Squid. That you could only see him for a brief moment before you die.

I pretended, but without success, that I understood the unknowable essence of the Giant Squid, and asked Tavi to continue his story about the new, strange creature at the bottom of the lagoon. I guess Tavi was tired. All I got out of him was a very general description of the "luminescent creature", which came down to the fact that "it, that creature" was similar in colour to a fluorescent shrimp.

"Good, I shall certainly pass it along to the Post," I said.

Tavi caught my meaning and, suddenly, with absolute calm, he smacked out: "Come and see for yourself."

He had read my mind. Rather than raise a fuss and distract people from pressing work, wouldn't it be better to first see for myself whether new danger threatened the island, or if somebody had simply come to visit us from the depths on some urgent business of his own!

"So it's not a squid?" I asked.

"No, no.... It's... like you...." answered the patient Tavi.

It wasn't worth wasting time on further questioning, because Tavi had his own point of view on many things, and sometimes came out with utterly unbelievable comparisons.

Ten steps away was the pillar with life-saving tackle. I ran to it, put on a mask and weight-belt, grabbed a torch and jumped into the lagoon.

Tavi slowly drew me down into the depths. With one hand I held on to his flipper, and with the other the lighted torch. The pencil of light pierced the thick blackness of a very long tunnel. Sometimes a fish swam into the light and scurried about unable to leave its magic confines, and falling crabs flashed through. We overtook a large detachment of dolphins who greeted us with loud smackings. Underwater, it was very noisy: one could hear the vibration of the machinery in the bowels of the island, the tramp and footfalls of the robots, voices of dolphins and fish, the typical droning of tiny squids rushing somewhere in the darkness, and hundreds

of other sounds that mingled with the inimitable sound background of the ocean.

At the very bottom, Tavi stopped. His delicate skin rippled nervously under my hand. I lit up the depths. Among the rocks and bunches of seaweeds swarmed the yellow crabs. It seemed to me they were moving in one direction. A strange force, which we are still in the habit of calling instinct, was again drawing the crabs somewhere else, to a more hospitable place. Judging by the direction, the yellow avalanche was moving towards an island eighty miles away. For crabs, this was an absolutely cosmic distance.

Suddenly, the light went out. However I twisted the torch, it would not switch on. Tavi snorted and slipped away from me. I wasn't worried, knowing he would soon return. Hanging the useless torch on my belt, I waited, watching "blue lightning" pierce the darkness ahead, by the explosion of luminescent clouds and the showering of sparks of all colours.

Dolphins approached me several times, but Tavi wasn't among them. I had learned to recognize him even in the dark, even with closed eyes, as soon as he was several metres away. The dolphins told me that a green creature was walking not far away. Finally, Tavi swam up and offered me his flipper. Two or three minutes later, I saw a faint human silhouette scrabbling along the bottom. Scared to death I involuntarily let go of Tavi's flipper. I'd never seen anything like it, and didn't know what this green creature was capable of; besides, I had no weapon with me. Tavi froze under my hand. He didn't make a sound.

The green creature stopped, straightened up,

and a round circle glowed a dim red on its forehead.

All at once it dawned on me.

"Penelope! Tavi, it's Penelope!" I screamed into the hydrophone and drummed my fingers on my friend's back.

"I know," answered Tavi. "Everybody knows," he finished mysteriously and raced for the surface.

Tavi was soon back with a rope in his mouth.

I asked him why he had pulled this trick instead of telling me at once that a robot was on the bottom.

"It was more fun that way," answered the prankster.

Ashore, near the walking crane, Kostya and Petya Samoilov were awaiting me.

"Congrats!" said Kostya. "I hope you've spent the time pleasantly in the ocean depths, while we've been hauling your crabs on our shoulders."

"Haul away!" I commanded.

"Aye, aye, sir!"

A luminescent Penelope flew with a splash from the water and swayed in the sling. Water dripped from her, as if from a pail full of holes. Unexpectedly, music spread over the lagoon. Penelope, her voice gurgling, started singing a cradle song! When had Kostya managed to reassemble her insides and put in a musical tape?

THREE HUNDRED SECONDS

I don't remember how many times I inhaled the fragrance of "Stardust" from the disc in my hand, and tried to call the cosmic communica-

tions exchange so I could see Biata and have a talk with her for 300 seconds. I had prepared a whole essay about life on the island, about our teacher, the dolphins, killer whales, blue whales, scooting on jet-boats, about Tavi, the yellow crabs, and Penelope. After painstaking editing, it took exactly 250 seconds to read it. The fifty left over, I kept for an epilogue expressing my regrets over the short meeting and the hope to see her again soon. I was amazed at my own genius in concentrating so much information into such a narrow frame.

Full of pride in my literary masterpiece, I showed it to Kostya.

"Wonderfull!" Kostya carelessly ran his eyes over the lines. "Simply wonderful! Especially this place: 'You should have seen Kostya standing between Matilda's eyes.' But..." and he laughed, "how little we know about women!"

"No generalizations, if you please!" I tore the essay away from him. "Don't forget whom you're talking about!"

"Sorry. Certainly, Biata's a remarkable girl, but even she's not that much under shock from her star."

I rudely interrupted, and asked him to leave me alone.

Kostya wished me very enjoyable seconds, and asked me to pass along his regards in my "epilogue". Then, laughing, he left.

As soon as the door closed behind him, I went resolutely to the videophone.

Instead of Biata, on the screen appeared a round-faced girl. She looked at me with a smile.

"Don't you know your old friends, you tramp!"

"Nadezhda! The Moontrotter!"

"In person. But I knew you at once. Have you forgotten how we were pulled out of the containers?"

Nadya and I had studied together in the school of the first cycle. How long ago that was! At that time, Nadya was more like a boy, and lorded it over our whole group. Once, she took it into her head to leave Earth and go to the moon, where they were then building the first astronomical town. We accepted her proposition with enthusiasm. A brilliantly simple plan was worked out. We decided to fly in the containers loaded with building material and other products. One night we sneaked into the cosmodrome, found the spaceship and near it a pile of empty boxes of almost weightless plastic. We sat in them till morning, were discovered by the robot-controllers, and handed over to the cosmodrome administration....

"You've changed terrifically," I said. "I scarcely knew you."

"For the worse?"

"No. You're a sight for sore eyes."

"You say that in a tone of regret."

"Right, I'm sorry to part with our childhood."

"It really was wonderful, wasn't it?" Her face flushed, her eyes sparkled, and she became amazingly like the former Nadezhda, the Moon-trotter, as they called her long afterwards in school.

"Very," I said. "What's up with you? Are you with Biata on field work?"

She shook her head.

"Biata's up there," her slender finger pointed upwards, "but I'm here," the finger dropped, "on Earth, pressing buttons, but it's only tem-

porary. I'll be playing the martyr at the Telecentre for another two weeks: compulsory employment for persons whose decisions fluctuate too much. Imagine! I still can't decide what to stick to. So you're milking whales?"

"Not yet, it's not that simple. So far, I'm only giving them beauty treatments."

"How interesting!... Don't you worry, so far all the lines to the Sputnik are busy—emergency talks by academicians regarding the Supernova. Somehow, it can't get round to exploding. So you're busy in a beauty parlor for sea primates? Sometime, you'll have to tell me about it in detail. And possibly, I'll personally pay you a surprise visit during a time of meditation on finding a regular profession. Recently, quite by accident, I met Davis. Remember him? Sort of slim and tall, melancholy, the one who shut us in the containers and cried because he was staying behind on Earth."

"Red-headed Charley!"

"The very same! Today, he suddenly appeared like a jack-in-the-box. He's looking for dinosaur and pterodactyl bones in Mongolia. Invited me to come along. Once I liked palaeontology. Have to think about such a serious step." She laughed.

Nadezhda was very lovely. Where had her boyish angularity gone to, her scornfully narrowed eyes, and peremptory judgements? It never occurred to me that she'd have trouble finding her place in the world!

"And I met Greta Grinberg, too. Oh, you don't know her. We studied together in theatrical school. She's in a film being shot in Mexico.... Well, all the best to you again. Good luck!"

She faded out, leaving behind that sad feeling you get when you read old letters.

After a few seconds, Biata's room materialized on the screen. Not all of it. I saw only part—pale green walls with a soothing grey pattern. Biata stood with her back to me, putting her hair in place before a mirror. She turned to me, and smiled.

"Hello there! I'm simply worked to death. We're receiving so much information! It would even overload your namesake, Big Ivan. The academicians raised a fuss at first, but then gave in, and now the most important electronic brain on the planet is at our disposal. Do you listen to our news bulletins?"

"Sometimes.... We also have a tense situation."

I made a stab at reading her my essay, learned by heart, but at my very first words her face reflected such pity that I fell silent in embarrassment. How could I compare the trifling things I was doing to the work of astronomers waiting for a supernova to flare up! That's what she thought.

"You must excuse me," said Biata. "I've become like one possessed: everything that has nothing to do with the Star seems beneath my attention right now. Maybe after the Supernova explodes, certain unforeseen changes will take place in the world. Perhaps, even tragic changes. By the way, we've observed mutations in bacteria under the influence of the great grandparticles. What if these particles are catalysts prompting the formation of nucleic acids and, therefore, the formation of life?... You have such a look, as if everything I'm saying is a revelation. You really are all wrapped up

in your whales. And I guess you've heard nothing about the new elementary particle? It's the greatest discovery of the century! Apparently, it's one of the 'bricks'—and perhaps the very first 'brick'—from which everything is created."

"How?" I gave her a stupid question. Biata smiled.

"I don't know." She looked at me expectantly. "What's new on Earth?"

"Nothing. Everything's just the way it was. Though I live on the water and in the water," I began reciting from the most interesting part of my essay, and again broke off.

"Exactly as it was. I'm following things on Earth. All of us here watch your wishy-washy programmes on anything at all except the most important! They've even developed theories, that deny the possibility of a supernova flaring up in our century. They offer such arguments as proof of their ridiculous views, that our Wood almost had a stroke!" She sighed deeply, and I made use of the pause.

"When will it flare up, after all?"

She caught the real meaning of my question: "When will we meet?"

"Soon, very soon. The neutrino flow is almost stabilized." Then she gave me a pile of questions. "Are you all right? Satisfied? I suppose you're in the sunshine and water all day? Are you friendly with the dolphins, like Kostya?"

To save time, I only nodded in answer.

"What if it takes another century to be stabilized?" I asked.

She smiled.

"Really, how can you! It's only a question of days, maybe hours or minutes, even moments!

But I'll come to your island for sure. Kostya's told me so much about everything, that at times I want to jump down to you, and forget everything else in the world. Well, cat got your tongue? Kostya wouldn't let me get a word in, and you...."

I listened, staring at the silvery face of the ion-clock behind Biata. The second hand was implacably finishing the last circle.

Biata turned away, and spoke fast.

"It's time. Say hello to Kostya. Your Stardust is lovely. The whole sputnik is filled with its fragrance, and even the cosmos around us within the surrounding parsec...."

The screen was bathed in a grey-green colour, as if it had absorbed the wall colour of Biata's room. I was looking at the glass of the videophone.

Concentrating, I managed for a fraction of a second to recreate Biata's face. She seemed to be smiling in farewell. I laughed, recalling my essay. She already knew it all. It wasn't for nothing that Kostya's eyes had gleamed so wickedly when I'd confided in him. I held my breath, just as I do before diving, as I kept returning to Biata's room in my thoughts and repeating her words over and over. I felt especially good because she had mentioned my Stardust. I wanted to share my happiness right away, and went to look for Kostya.

Wearing a blinding white work-coat, Kostya was fussing pompously beside the analyser in his lab. He didn't notice me, kept scrutinizing the spectra and singing:

"I've got it right, my colleague-O,
I've got it right, my pals,

The wonderful analysis
Of two sweet little gals!"

"What kind of gals, with such an amazing spectrum?" I asked, looking over his shoulder.

"Oh, the gals? That's just for rhyming. Imagine, I've detected niobium!" He turned, examined me from top to toe, and broke into a howl.

"Get out of here, you tramp! You'll ruin all my work. Without a gown on! I sterilized the lab for a whole hour. Get out.... Quick, and don't raise the dust, don't even let your trousers brush against anything!"

"Oh-ho! Niobium," I said, clapping him on the shoulder. "I've only just talked with...."

In a frenzy of horror, Kostya tried to cover the experimental preparations with his arms.

"Never.... I'll never forgive you for this!" he ground out, staring at me with eyes full of hate.

"I only just saw Biata! Sends her regards, you old idiot. Are you listening?"

"Get out!" groaned Kostya. "Get out, and fast!"

My friend's anger only made me smile. Over some kind of niobium! Imagine refusing to hear the latest news of Biata! "Hard as nails," I thought, looking at Kostya with admiration.

I was glad he wasn't a bit jealous, and his rage aroused my respect for him as a researcher. This "lazybones" sometimes did not leave the lab for days, and it was then that he showed amazing persistence in hunting for atoms of rare-earth elements, trying to figure out the role they played in the cells of living matter.

In the laboratory of "thinking" machines and electronic optical devices, I sat down at my

desk and began a run-through of a microfilm tape of the cells of sea-lilies affected by "sleeping", or dormant, viruses. From time to time, the virus behaved with the utmost respectability. Such behaviour might last for a long time—for months, even years. But sometimes, under the influence of certain, as yet unknown, factors, the virus broke all rules of communal living, and began to multiply tempestuously so that it destroyed its "foster-cell". I was searching for the causes of its aggressiveness. Suddenly, I noticed that such a process was beginning to show up in a series of frames. Apparently, I gave a fairly loud whistle, because three scientists on the regular staff raised their heads, and then bent over their desks again.

"Strangely enough, my viruses turned active at the very moment there were no visible reasons to do so," I announced, in my defence.

The scientists made no answer.

I switched off the microfilm magnifier and, getting to my feet, inadvertently made a noise when pushing back my chair. One of the three gave a faint groan. I made my excuses, stood for a moment, and went to the door. I knew I couldn't work just then.

The island was covered with verdure. Tropical plants had taken over every bit of space that was unoccupied by work or living premises, by laboratories, machinery and engineering structures. I found myself on a path running through a green tunnel, steeped in the gentle fragrance of vanilla and something else that reminded me of my Stardust.

The path led to the Central Post, which resembled the control-room of a gigantic liner. After

the scorching brightness of the sun, here it seemed cool and quiet. Petya Samoilov sat before the instrument panel and fixedly watched the western sector on a round viewing-screen where a green strip of ocean was pulsating with a typical, almost inaudible tumult. The waves tossed up a red buoy bearing a whole set of antennae, with the number "9" painted in heavy black on its side. Two hundred yards from the buoy, a troop of dolphin guards moved nervously back and forth. You could hear their characteristic voices. Some of them wore on their temples "electric spears", small streamlined devices.

Petya nodded in answer to my greeting.

"Black Jack is somewhere near by. His scouts were here again. This time, they kept far enough away from the shock waves. I don't know what they're up to. I've called the boys from the *Kallmar*."

I heard a grating sound: on the screen, a racing jet-boat came flying up with a roar and, sharply braking, almost slowed to a stop. In the glassed-in cabin sat two sun-bronzed drivers; strangers, where I was concerned.

"They're from the *Kallmar*," said Petya. "Fine work they've got, I must say."

Dolphins surrounded the jet-boat. The patrol leader began his report on the situation. Petya pressed one of the multitude of buttons on the panel, and at once you could hear the translation:

Jack's "people", sixty strong, divided into ten groups, and simultaneously began a search of the depths for a passage between the buoys. We turned on the supplementary high tension,

and attacked one group with arrows. One group went down in the depths, the others ran west and then north.

The jet-boat raced north. Four patrol-dolphins overtook it and rushed ahead in formation.

Petya turned towards me.

"There's a race for you!" he exclaimed, smacking his lips. "I envy those boys from the *Kalimar*. They're the only ones allowed to run the jet-boat full power, and also to use morphine ampoules. They won't catch Jack, though. But maybe they'll lasso one of his greenhorns, and then they'll be able to prepare one more truce envoy."

"D'you really think there's a chance of re-educating Jack that way?"

"Of course not! But it might influence the rest and, as they number about a thousand, some of them will prefer legal status to being outlaws. In the Arctic, killer-whales have proven themselves good codfish herders. And in our waters, too, there are now tribes that are almost peaceful. But Jack himself can only be stopped by a mass siege by sea and air...."

A melodious drone was heard and signal lights blinked on the control panel. On the video-phone screen appeared the lean face of a native of India.

"Ah, Chauri Singh!" said Petya, with deliberate cheerfulness. "Hi there, I'm tuned in!"

"Thanks for giving me frequent calls this afternoon, and also for your very kind promises," the Indian said in a deep voice.

"Don't worry, my dear Chauri Singh," Petya winked at me. "At last, I think I've found

you a stand-in. This is our new trainee, Ivan Kanev, better known as Ive. He wants a change of surroundings, and a little diversion."

Chauri looked at me, nodded, and faded out.

"Well, so everything's set up," said Petya. "That's our specialist in bionics, engaged in interesting work in the field of cephalopod molluscs. You haven't had the chance of meeting him yet, I suppose, because he's incessantly busy with his automatic recorders, or jolting down somewhere in his *Kambala* (Flounder) bathyscaphe. Happy diving! Go and see his 'lair'—lots of curious things there. He'll be expecting you, so don't dream of being late; otherwise he'll think I'm no end of a flippant fellow. And it won't do you any good, either. Well, what are you looking at me like that for? Off you go to Chauri. You've not been down deeper than 20 metres yet, have you? Or at the most about a hundred in a tourist bathyscaphe? But here I can guarantee you a whole kilometre!"

"A kilometre is always a kilometre," I said. Then I thanked Petya and started off for Chauri's lair.

THROUGH THE EYES OF AN OCTOPUS

Chauri's lair proved to be an enormous laboratory, with one whole wall taken up by an aquarium. Behind the plate glass front, which was about five metres high and not less than eight long, the turquoise water seemed motionless. Yet its unusually transparent depths teemed with the life of the continental shelf: gliding

schools of fish arrayed in diverse "festive" attire; branching coral bushes in hues of deep crimson, white, rose, green and bright yellow; the treacherously beautiful sea anemones "bloomed" on stone slabs; gracefully rising ribbons of dark-green, brown and red seaweeds; across the bottom scurried crabs and crayfish; pearl oysters lay with open valves.

The second showpiece of the lab was a lamp; a large, transparent cup on a bronze tripod. Hanging motionless in the waterfilled cup was an unattractive albino octopus, apparently one of the deep-water types.

"Why is it here?" I wondered, looking into the cup.

The octopus "answered" me. It glowed from within with a blue light, and all its surface was covered with multicoloured glittering points arranged with great artistry. You could read by the light radiating from the octopus. I had never seen anything like it. "If only I could send that to Biata on the sputnik!" I thought.

As soon as I walked away from the cup, the octopus turned off its rays.

Chauri Singh appeared not to notice me at all.

Should I leave? I wondered, and at once rejected the idea. Everything in the room invited attention: the many strange appliances, the coquettish octopus, the grandiose aquarium which you could watch for hours. But the man in charge of it all was especially intriguing. Tall and thin, he was intently observing an oscillograph and telescreen, both at once. Focused on the screen was a section of the ocean, or rather sea-bed, piled with blackish-brown

chunks of basalt. Judging by the dark green shade of the water, the depth must be considerable. Unexpectedly, I saw an octopus, an unusually large one. I made out its dim outlines and huge violet-black eyes. Before it lay a mound of bivalve molluscs.

The oscillograph traced an even, slightly wavy line. I guessed that Chauri Singh, by some means beyond my knowledge, had found a way of observing and recording the biocurrents of this mollusc's brain.

Chauri Singh turned and looked at me.

"Did you ever happen to look through a stranger's eyes? No, I don't mean the eyes of another man, naturally, for then the difference would be hardly noticeable. But let's say, through the eyes of a dog, a beetle, a chicken, fish or an elephant. Well now, imagine you've been turned into a cephalopod mollusc!" He pressed some yellow keys, and the picture on the television screen momentarily changed.

Now the water seemed quite different, absolutely transparent, a melting element of tender violet. Floating within this substance were enormous rocks whose formation was fantastic and vague, and upon them grew a variety of strange plants whose pastel tints were very intricately blended. Through this violet world moved grotesque fish whose shapes and colours surpassed all the extraordinary things I had ever seen in the depths of the tropic seas.

Of a sudden the picture began to change. The colours grew more vivid, the outlines of the rocks, plants, living creatures adopted more familiar forms. The coral bushes blazed like scarlet flames that gradually began changing

colour, something like cooling steel. Unexpectedly, an anemone which had settled on a coral bush changed the colours of its "petals" and stem as if momentarily putting on a new dress. A terribly absurd fish underwent an amazing transformation, as if it had been painted by a master of abstract art. At first wide and flat, it turned into a many-coloured ribbon which coiled up and became an ordinary angel-fish, except that it was not black and gold but red and yellow. Its eyes flashed with green fire which slowly died out. The whole seascape changed, like the stage sets of a Japanese review, except that the stage producer of the marine performance possessed even greater fantasy, a better supply of stage machinery and still other means that were far beyond my grasp.

"That's approximately the way things look to an octopus. The lens of its eye is adjustable, like a camera lens. You must also allow for the fact that my electronic machines are far from perfect, and give only a pale shadow of the world of an octopus. Its palette is incomparably richer, and the primary colours differ from those perceived by our sight: my equipment transfers the colours into a frequency within our optic range. Apparently, we shall never manage to see the real world of these creatures," Singh ended on a note of melancholy.

Suddenly, the colours on the screen ran together, fused into a blur and spread out in white lines.

"You see!" cried Singh, gesturing towards the screen. "For a whole week now, and at this time every day, telecamera information becomes distorted on all channels."

A blue ray was jumping crazily on the oscillograph.

"Have to check the electronic attachment control. It's down there. Beside the octopus. That's why I asked for a helper. Hope you'll forgive me, but instructions forbid anyone to use the 'saucer' alone. Have I broken your work-rhythm for the day?"

"I was already out of step."

"Then there's no better way of getting back your mental equilibrium." He switched off the equipment.

THETIS

I had never yet been down in the deep seas inside a "flying saucer". My experience as a deep-sea researcher was limited to a few trips on an excursion hydrostat in Oceania, the Red Sea and off the coast of Florida. True, the previous summer I had been lucky enough to go on a cruising bathyscaphe and stay in the North Atlantic for a whole month. For many years, they conducted successful tests there on domesticating Greenland whales and walruses. But a jaunt on a huge ship like that, with comfortable cabins, salons and gymnasiums, could hardly be compared with a trip in the *Kambala*. In the latter, you feel the ocean with every cell of your body; it's almost the same as skin-diving with a Robb mask or a deep-water aqua-lung. The *Kambala* proved fairly roomy. Two wide seats in front and one in the stern for a trainee. But this time I sat beside Chauri Singh at the control panel.

With a faint hissing sound, the access hatch of the *Kambala* slipped through the grooves into the lock.

Chauri Singh gave me an inquiring look, as if asking whether I had changed my mind about going on this risky excursion. Apparently, not finding any sign of hesitation on my face, he laid his hand on the varicoloured keyboard. Effortlessly, the *Kambala* moved ahead, sliding through the water. In the centre of the lagoon, she began to submerge. Through the quartz glass of the observation windows, the water gave a splashing sound in farewell, and a blue light flooded the cabin. The course indicator began describing a curve, descending by the vertical displacement scale. We were going down in a wide spiral.

Some dolphins appeared to see us off peering in through the windows: Tavi was one of them. I waved to him.

Tavi swam almost flat up against the glass, as if he would bar the way.

Chauri turned on the hydrophone, and the dolphins' voices came in. You could hear alarm in their excited, whistling phrases.

"They're warning us about something," I said, and didn't recognize my own voice. It had never seemed so squeaky, and words had never flown from my mouth at such a terrific speed.

Singh smiled, and put on a translucent mask. One of the same lay in a side pocket on the plating at my right. I put it on, and now could hear normal speech.

"We're breathing an oxygen-helium mixture with a minimum of nitrogen added. Helium distorts sound," Singh explained, and nodded at

Tavi. "He warns us not to go down into the Deep Canyon. They saw a large squid there. Perhaps, it's that same legendary Giant Squid you've probably heard about."

Tavi and his friends left us as soon as Chauri Singh told them that his plans for the day didn't include investigating the Deep Canyon.

"They have a purely religious respect for the Giant Squid and for the no less powerful Great Serpent," remarked the scientist.

We were surrounded by a school of curious porkfish. They pressed their snouts against the glass and stared at us with round, merry eyes.

"And I fully sympathise with them," continued Singh, referring to the dolphins. "During the yellow crab invasion, did you have feelings of depression, stupid desires, or spite?"

I told him what had happened to us that night.

"Dolphins have experienced the hypnotic power of squids for a much longer period of time and, on this account, they have put correct notions together but added a little mystical colouring."

A flood of rustling sounds came from the hydrophone: the porkfish were "appreciating" our appearance.

From time to time, the "saucer" moved close to the seaweed-covered wall of our island where many other dialects of the ocean's inhabitants were added to the rustlings of the porkfish, especially the voices of shrimps which reminded you of butter sizzling in a frying pan.

The porkfish were left behind as soon as the water temperature dropped below 20 degrees Centigrade.

We were forty metres deep. Shadows disappeared. We found ourselves in a zone of smooth, green light. It was impossible to tell whether it came from—above, below, or from the side. Making a screw turn, we again approached the island wall, decorated with seaweed. Suddenly, Chauri stopped the bathyscaphe.

Not far away, near the very wall, hovered a gaudy swarm of fish. They were all trying to force their way into the centre of a shoal where, apparently, something very important was going on. I noticed some lobster-eyed trunk fish that were brown and stippled with round white specks, also the black and gold angel fish, and the golden brown wrasses which, for their gracefulness, are called "demoiselle".

The angel-fish were offering their sides to the "demoiselle"; motionless, they hung head down or lay belly up.

"An ordinary medical post," said Chauri Singh, smiling. "The 'first-aid' or 'sanitarian' fish treat their brothers who are suffering from skin diseases. Such medical symbiosis is still a mystery to us, like almost all the phenomena we meet with in the ocean. We don't know why carnivorous fish take mercy on the little 'first-aiders'." He turned on the engine. "I thought I'd discovered a new species of the sanitarian fish, but I simply failed to recognize the blue-eyed kind. Did you notice that green fish with the violet head and blue-and-black stripes?"

I confessed that I hadn't, though during my underwater excursions I had come across this graceful, blue-eyed beauty.

Looking into the greenish twilight, Singh continued.

"These creatures feed on poisonous slime, fungi that are fish parasites, on colonies of bacteria and crayfish-parasites. All that without getting contaminated themselves. Odd, isn't it?"

"Yes... very...."

"We've managed to isolate antibiotics from the blood of the demoiselle. Soon, pharmacists will supply us with the toxin, and we'll be able to help out the 'sanitarian' fish. Diseased fish are already 'coming in' to experimental outpatient hospitals which we've set up on reefs and special medical buoys...."

At a depth of seventy-five metres, we found ourselves in a community of minute cuttle-fish. They were almost invisible, assuming the colour of the water. Of a sudden, ahead of us appeared many brown spots with blurred outlines, which fused together so that we were soon in impenetrable darkness.

"We've been shot at from rockets filled with 'aerosol'," laughed Singh. We'll have to wait till the 'smoke screen' disappears. It's risky to descend to the seabed in the dark, and we can't turn on the searchlight. Besides, it would be useless: this smoke screen is impenetrable.

The cabin was filled with strange sounds resembling faint sighs. The trembling arrows and ciphers on the instrument panel glimmered with green, blue, lilac and red lights.

Chauri Singh began telling me about cephalopod molluscs. I listened, but thought of Biata.

I imagined that she was nestled down on the back seat of the bathyscaphe and, peering into the darkness outside the glass where bluish sparks were now flaring up, was thinking of her stars or, in her mind, looking through film

plates with traces of atom fragments. For her, all this was full of poetry. Or perhaps, she was experiencing the sensation of mystery shrouding our *Kambala*. Naturally, she would identify the ocean with space. In the latter, stars are born; and here, life. Without life, there are neither stars nor planets. Without life, they are nothing....

"You know from the elementary course that they have three hearts and blue blood," Singh was saying, quietly.

Biata would have laughed at hearing this: "What aristocrats! In the olden times, blue blood was considered the privilege of royal families."

"The blue blood is not conditioned by iron, as is the case with mammals, but by copper. I was fortunate enough to discover two new species of deep-water cuttle-fish..., " Chauri Singh was saying.

At a stopover in the mountains, Biata had spotted a mouse, an ordinary grey mouse—and she was as happy about it as if she had discovered an utterly new species... .

Chauri Singh raised his voice.

"Isn't it surprising that millions of years before man appeared nature discovered one of the most perfect means of moving through space—the jet engine—and installed it in cephalopod molluscs.... An ideal engine! It has existed hundreds of millions of years without any changes, and we discovered it only recently....

Biata would have whispered: "He's in love with his molluscs..." and, falling silent, would have begun to hear a hymn to cephalopod molluscs.

"Did you ever hear anything from the dolphins about the Giant Squid?" Chauri Singh's voice came through to me.

"Oh, yes!"

"And probably you noticed that they don't especially like to talk about him, so as not to draw his anger down upon them? Even our civilized dolphins cannot get rid of the inexplicable awe they have for this great ten-armed lord of the deeps...."

And perhaps she would have found my hand in the darkness, and whispered: "How wonderful, I've!"

Outside the window there was twilight. The brownish cloud was slowly dispersing.

"I'll show you that specimen of mine, Thetis." Chauri Singh pressed one of the keys. "She has a quite extraordinary form of tentacles. If, of course, you have the time...."

The small telescreen lit up, and we saw the bottom: the lumps of coral, the schools of fish. A dark shadow hurtled past. The fish simultaneously dived into the depths.

After a ten-minute search, the *Kambala* hung over the now familiar coral masses. The octopus slowly moved her tentacles and looked at us: now her eyes radiated a bluish light. For a moment, she blushed like an embarrassed girl, then turned absolutely crimson, after which black stripes appeared—a sign of greater excitement. With unbelievable swiftness, the octopus changed her vivid colouring to a pale ash-grey.

"Thetis is excited, very excited," whispered Chauri. "Only under extreme excitement, fright, does she turn pale. Not necessarily grey, as she

is at present. Look, a pearly tone now. She can become yellow, pale-blue or a delicate lilac; in anger, the thick, vivid shades are more often used. The mechanism of this phenomenon is unusually complicated. Distributed in the surface layers of the skin are chromatophores or pigment cells, and also cells unusually sensitive to light rays. The chromatophores contain all the colour combinations we know, as well as colour combinations and hues which it is impossible to meet anywhere on earth, let alone obtain them in chemical laboratories. The choice of colours used is not only determined by sight—reaction to what is seen, but by the skin itself as well as the emotions. In this business, mood plays the decisive part. So far, we haven't found one other creature capable of changing the colour of the body so fast and for a definite purpose. The chameleon, in comparison to the octopus, is a sorry dilettant. As for man, he uses some three or four colour tones all in all, no more. Now then, can you or I make, say, the arm turn red? Perhaps, after a great deal of training; even then it would be difficult. But the octopus can turn all its eight tentacles different colours, and even put ornamentation on them, reproducing underwater background on the surface of the skin!"

Thetis went suddenly limp and her tentacles lost their elasticity.

"A little soporific or sleeping drug won't hurt our Thetis," said Singh. "It will even do her good, after today's excitement."

We kept near the very bottom. The searchlight darted out, illuminating the whole of the mollusc; the seaweed shone; the anemones were

like drooping orchids for the narcotic acted upon them, too, and they slept. Again the skin of the octopus momentarily took on the vivid tones of the surrounding seascape. It was very beautiful, this mollusc that resembled the precious majolica found only in the quarries of Sogdiana.

A telecamera with an attachment for transmitting nerve impulses was set on a hill resembling a flowerbed just three metres away from the shelter of the octopus. The camouflage safely hid the apparatus from curious eyes. Nobody but Singh could have picked it out from the stone, overgrown with seaweed. A mechanical arm carefully replaced the attachment, a small, dark cylinder.

"That's the whole operation," said Chauri Singh. "One could have envisaged an automatic replacement of the attachment, but I like this kind of outing. Too much automation limits the spontaneous feeling of the world, creating only the semblance of real events, though they are essentially the same."

Some stout, heavy groupers whose colouring was much like that of the barbel, appeared close to the sleeping Thetis. They seemed to completely ignore the bright ray of our searchlight, and nosed around, unafraid, even putting their heads under a tentacle to help themselves to the remains of the octopus' feast.

"How did those stupid groupers find out Thetis is asleep?" cried Singh, in surprise. "Really, it's amazing. You see, their subconscious experience should tell them that an octopus never sleeps; at any rate, it is never caught off guard!"

Chauri turned off the searchlight and, raising the *Kambala* up to twenty metres, turned on the miniature oscillograph mounted beside the telescreen. We began watching the curve of the oscillograph. It became more regular, but even though the octopus was asleep one could observe its nervous strain.

Slowly the octopus stirred its tentacles, shivered, and sank deeper into the shadow of the coral mass.

"The curve started jumping like fury," Chauri expressed his thoughts aloud. "Such a change in her state isn't normal. All of Thetis responses have risen to the third power."

I recalled Biata's words about the mutations of bacteria, my own microfilm with the record of the behaviour of the virus, the increase in the neutrino flux, and the discovery of a new elementary particle.

Chauri listened to me attentively.

"It's possible. Though the effect of neutrino particles on the organism of an octopus, even though the flux is tremendously increased, is about equal to nil. Water partially serves as protection from hard radiation; therefore, mutations in the ocean occur much more rarely than on land. This is one reason for the conservatism of life in the ocean. You are speaking of phenomena observed in connection with the Supernova? A new elementary particle?" He thought a few seconds, and then continued: "Have to look more carefully through the last bulletins from the astronomical satellites and the works of my colleagues. The last few days I've been too buried in work, finishing a series

of experiments. Exceptionally important conclusions depend on them."

"D' you suppose that cephalopod molluscs possess intelligence?"

Chauri Singh smiled.

"The brain, above all else, is a receiver and transmitter of information. These molluscs have a perfect nervous system, and possess more sense organs than land animals. The amount of information they receive is tremendous. We have investigated their capability for solving problems after they have mastered the new experience. I think that, following the discovery of the dolphin civilization—I repeat, of the dolphin civilization—we have to consider one more aspect of intelligence, and with logic differing from that of the primates of the earth or the sea. I agree with your honourable teacher that nature could not set its choice only upon man by giving intelligence to him alone. The forms of reasoning are just as boundlessly varied as the forms of life."

BIG JACQUES

We were now travelling through the dense green shadow under our floating island, past pillars resembling the trunks of enormously thick palm trees. These were cables overgrown with seaweed. The basalt monolith of the island stood at mooring anchor.

A forest of coral slowly floated to meet us. The stone trees were shot with hues of mother-of-pearl, and seemed airily light, weightless, like the schools of cheerfully-coloured fish soa-

ring over and through the coral groves. From time to time, a glade opened before us which had a remote likeness to a mountain meadow in springtime.

Attempting to depict underwater seascapes, you involuntarily use the rude palette of land or sea surfaces, but it is the very last thing to do. There are no such colours on land or on sea. Underwater, colour is an unstable thing, and it is hard to say what the actual colour is of creatures who live there.

In front of us appeared a school of silvery rose mackerel but, as soon as we drew near, the fish became bright yellow. Soon, they moved into a zone of stronger light and at once turned into precious stones—rubies and burning gold. Then their colours faded, and now the fish were pearly grey. But even this “modest” attire did not last long. Before they vanished from our field of vision, the school was painted in golden-topaz tones.

“Fish change their colour depending upon the angle that light falls on their scales,” said Chauri. “It’s a simple explanation, but not an exhaustive one. We know almost nothing, as yet, about this great house we originated from. For us it is still a strange place. Man has long thought he had pressing affairs elsewhere, first on dry land and then in space. Nevertheless hundreds of years may pass before earthmen are lucky enough to encounter a world, somewhere in the depths of the universe, which might in some measure be compared with the ocean. And more likely than not, it will never happen. Nature is infinitely rich and, perhaps, it is here that she had demonstrated her highest creative

power while up there only variants are found. Sublime variants of unusual complexity, but lacking Earth's warmth and countless diversity."

Chauri Singh pressed a few keys and looked at the depth gauge. The red line on the scale was slowly dropping.

"Not at all dangerous," he said. "We are being drawn down by one of the branches of a deep-sea current. A cold current, as you see," he nodded at a dial, "only eight degrees Centigrade. The cold current flows over a mountain range and enriches the ocean waters with nutritive salts. The branch is rather narrow: it runs between warm waters as if enclosed in a pipe. On the borders of the current, there is a highly intensive development of life...."

His mind seemed preoccupied. He was clearly thinking of something else, something more important.

A reddish dusk was slowly falling beyond the glass cowling. Greenish sparks flared. The red line on the depth gauge dropped to 250 metres.

On Singh's left varicoloured lights flashed on, showing the working scheme of our bathyscaphe's engines. For a minute, the scientist silently studied it; then, pulling the back of the seat aside, he peered into the engine room. His brown forehead was cut by a deep groove. He frowned as if in pain.

I also looked into the brightly lit interior of our *Kambala*. It was equipped with a fairly simple engine run by 'perpetual' batteries, the type that operates reliably for years under any conditions. Engines of this type were usually installed in racing jet-boats.

"When were the contacts cleaned last?" I asked.

"I don't know. I never did it. My colleague Jean Lagrange usually looks after the engine, and also the safety service inspector. Jean flew to Tokyo, to a symposium on coral polyps—that's his hobby. We work together on basic researches: experiments on the octopus was his idea, and he did the planning. So, you say it's the contacts?"

"Yes. Probably that's why the engine failed. Have you got a knife?"

"Just a moment!" He was long fishing through his pockets, then under his feet, and finally pulled out a small all-purpose knife.

I scraped the contacts, wondering why this wool-gathering scientist simply didn't empty the ballast cisterns: we could have floated up without any trouble, and repaired this minor defect up there in the sunlight. Obviously, it could be put down to pedanticism, acquired over years of assiduous work. "For such people, everything must be mended and cleared up without waste of time," I thought to myself. "And yet people like them make no fewer mistakes than we simple mortals." I arrived at this last conclusion rather condescendingly. The fact that he didn't know how to clean contacts made me feel very superior. "If he was alone," my thoughts ran, "or with another dunderhead like himself, I can imagine what a mess they would be in until they were fished out by the life-guards."

The engine came alive, but we continued to go down. Singh answered my look of inquiry.

"The canyon is very narrow, and has arches in some places. There are many projections. I

might damage the ship's body or end up under an avalanche. You figure we should have surfaced at once when I noticed the trouble, but then we might have been drawn under the island's foundation. Not a very attractive prospect, as you see. To find yourself in a funny position is no less tragic than not knowing the scheme of the bathyscaphe's engine." He laughed as carelessly as a child.

I felt awfully ashamed. This amazing man had guessed the state I was in, and shown how my fine psychological conclusions should be dealt with. Reluctantly, I recalled my snap judgments on the behaviour of my friends. Once, Professor Kaufman, in General Psychology, had praised my tables of psychological constants and, on that foundation, I had begun making hasty "diagnoses" which "defined" characters, thus drawing up something like psychological horoscopes. Kostya had especially suffered in this regard.

My last tiff with Biata was also over the same thing. I had tried to get her to throw over not only the star but astrophysics in general, because her highly emotional tendency wouldn't bring anything worth-while to that science.

"Astronomy requires a cold mathematical mind," I had told her. "By nature, you get easily carried away—you should take up poetry, art or, as a last resort, the creation of 'wild hypotheses' for the Institute of Forecasting Useful Things."

"You... you... yourself are a 'wild hypothesis' from the institute of useless things," she had answered.

Depth, 800 metres. The concentrated pencil

beam from our searchlight pierced the dense, colourless mass of water which surrounded us with an impenetrable gloom.

Singh put the *Kambala* into a full 360-degree spiral. On the right, the beam slid along basalt pillars and boulders. The locator showed almost an equal distance from the canyon walls.

"We've reached the narrowest spot, a bit dangerous for travelling with corroded contacts," said the scientist. "Jean and I have taken this route many times. The current becomes horizontal and runs east at a depth of 1500 metres. Then the canyon turns into a wide valley, and we can rise to the surface without risk."

I wanted to ask about the aim of such risky excursions, but Singh apparently read my thoughts.

"Occasionally, we visit Big Jacques—that's the name Lagrange gave to a rather interesting squid. Soon we'll be passing his castle. Keep watching left. A rare specimen."

The *Kambala* held steady, turning its nose to the nearest left wall. The speed of the current ran five kilometres an hour. As if projected on a screen, scenes flicked by showing a gloomy and rather monotonous seascape.

"There he is!" cried Chauri triumphantly. "Jacques is used to our visits now, and doesn't show any special alarm. Not like the first time...."

The *Kambala* stopped: her "fins" backwatered against the current. The searchlights lit up the endless columns of a dead city. And then I saw eyes, reflecting the rays of our searchlights. They were huge, more than fifty centimetres in diameter! The gigantic beak of the sinister

monster jutted out between the two head tentacles which were not less than thirty metres long. The eight tentacle-"arms" were a bit shorter, and hung motionless from the cylindrical torso. Big Jacques stood, leaning his ten-metre body against a basalt pillar, like a student waiting, with casual indifference, for his girlfriend. From the loudspeaker I could hear frequent hissing clacks: blinded by the brilliant light, Jacques had turned on his locator apparatus and was feeling us out with ultra-sound waves. Outwardly, he still remained motionless, except for the long tentacles stretched towards us like arms, to shield his eyes from the unbearably dazzling light.

"Is that the Giant Squid in person?" I asked, for some reason in a whisper.

"There are much bigger ones. This is an average specimen. Cachalots, his only enemies, rarely come here; and in ten years he might become a real Giant Squid."

I was suddenly caught by a foreboding that something terrible would inevitably happen to us. The same feeling I had had that night when the yellow crabs invaded our island.

"Don't give in to it!" warned Chauri Singh. "We'll soon get out of the active sphere of his hypnotic power. There's something about us that Big Jacques doesn't like today. It's possible he intends to find out what, after all, our 'saucer' is made of. Is it eatable? If so, then...." He didn't finish, for we were both thrown into the safety net before the control panel.

Then the "saucer" turned upside down and we stood on our heads. The sponge plastic lining

softened the blow. A sharp twist, and I fell on my companion.

Chauri Singh tried to calm me down.

"Don't worry, I've put all the ampoules into him. He...." Without finishing, the scientist in his turn landed on me. The "saucer" slowly rotated. I flew onto the back seat and, bracing feet and hands against the sides, I felt as if I were in an astronaut's "whirligig" training device. Chauri Singh also found a way to brace himself, and was clever enough to press now one, now another key on the panel.

I expected the "saucer" to crack any minute and fill with water, and then everything would be over. As I thought this, strange as it was, I felt no fear. On the contrary, I morbidly wanted it to happen, and as fast as possible.

The "saucer" stopped rotating. Chauri Singh pressed his face against the window. I fought against my apathy and also turned my eyes from the instrument panel to the window. The "saucer" hung at an angle of 45 degrees. The pencil beams of the searchlight passed out into the darkness, but their diffused light permitted me to see the squid. Clinging to the wall, Jacques held us with the suckers of his outstretched tentacles. His eyes, hotly brimming with violet light, were fixed on me. At any rate, I thought he stared only at me. Two tentacles, taut as strings, reminded me of two roads; you wanted to step on them and walk right towards the eyes....

"How much longer does he intend looking at us?" Singh growled out.

"Jacques is asleep," I answered, pierced

through with tenderness for the mollusc. "Let's not wake him. Please, don't wake him."

"I don't feel like doing that just now either. But he's not asleep. He didn't get a very big dose of the sleeping drug, because much of it was carried away by the current. Even so, we'll try to break loose from his hug, while he's in a state of prostration."

I began to follow Singh's brown fingers, and the telescreen. The tentacles were glued flat against the top of the "saucer", assuming its dark green colour. Mechanical arms rose from their nest, caught the mollusc's feelers with their pincers and tried in vain to pull them off the metal plating. The skin split open, and the water carried away the mollusc's blue blood. The steel pincers raised the tentacles a bit, and found themselves enmeshed in a triple coil. I hit my forehead painfully against the glass, there was a crack, and we were thrown back with incredible speed. Then followed a new jolt, a crack, and silence fell. The "saucer" took a horizontal position.

"He tore off our metal 'arms'," said Chauri Singh. "Don't you find we got off easy? So long as he doesn't take it into his head to repeat everything from the beginning.... No, we're moving. No doubt he's studying the construction of the mechanical arms." Chauri laughed.

I sat silent for a long time, feeling a pleasant weakness all through my body, the way you do after too hot a bath. I suddenly felt like a fool, and for a whole minute gave way to laughter that seemed to choke me. It was a bit hard getting hold of myself.

“Your next meeting with Jacques won’t make such a strong impression on you. You must fight against his ‘will’. I know it’s hard—to make yourself be stronger.”

“I wouldn’t want to meet him again,” I admitted, and stared with alarm at the depth gauge.

It showed 1500 metres! Almost the *Kambala*’s limit. We followed the underwater stream for about a kilometre, and began the rise to the surface. Chauri Singh turned off the searchlight. The *Kambala* was surrounded by absolute dark. The miserly luminescence from the gauges on the instrument panel only intensified the perfect black colour outside the glass. We were silent, bewitched by the cruel, black stillness.

Suddenly, a tiny light flashed by, followed by another; and then a line of bright dots floated past looking like the portholes of a big bathyscaphe cruiser. All around it darted bursts of multicoloured torpedo flares.

“Even here, a bright colour has the same functions as in the illuminated part of the biosphere. It serves as stimulation for the preservation of the species, and also as a means of orientation for predators. All are predators here. Light is bait, a unique lure such as anglers use. Light brings both life and death. But how beautiful! Look! What fantasy an artist would need to create such masterpieces!”

Moving towards us, at an angle, came a living piece of jewellery composed of diamonds, rubies, vivid emeralds and many other precious stones I didn’t know the names of. Now they would die out, now flare up and sparkle with

colour as if being turned by invisible hands before an invisible source of light.

Our searchlight was switched on, and we saw a repellent, off-white creature consisting almost entirely of gaping jaws. It had huge eyes, but it completely failed to react to light and slowly moved along its course.

The searchlight went out, and again the precious stones flashed, arranged with unusual artistry to form an intricate ornament.

"How deceiving beauty can be! Probably, most creatures with a highly developed nervous system have much in common in their notion of beauty."

At a depth of 100 metres, we were met by Tavi and his friends. Their excited voices burst through the hydrophone.

"We had them worried," smiled Chauri Singh. "The great depths are as full of mystery for them as distant space is for us. I suppose that's how we'll meet our people when they return home from Alpha in the Centaurus constellation."

I was suddenly brimming with joy, more than that—with rapture. As if I really were returning home after many years of wandering far from Earth. What a glorious light flooded the cabin! What wonderful, happy creatures circled around us!

"The reaction after returning from the great deeps is extremely pleasant. I always have that feeling you get after a severe illness, when danger is far behind, and ahead lies work, happiness, friends. And everything is mine, including the sun and the ocean," Chauri Singh said happily.

SABOTAGE

The blue waters of the sea, glorified by the poets, are neither more nor less than a lifeless desert. The blue densities are very poor in plankton. These are the ocean 'deserts'. And if shoals of fish are encountered there, then these are only wanderers migrating to a more auspicious place. In the seas, the colours of life are green and red (in an infinite number of tints and shades). The green and red oases are settled by tiny seaweeds and living creatures, where 2-3-millimetre copepods look like giants, and 5-centimetre euphausids, crustacea resembling shrimps, look like supergiants. Euphausids are also known as "stalk-eyes" because of the enormous size of their agate eyes.

Euphausids are the favourite food of the great blue whale, the hump-backed whale and other dorsal-finned whales, the rorquals. East of our island rock lie the red "fields", the blue whale pastures. For the most part, these are the breeding grounds of the euphausids, calanuses and other copepods. The unusual colour of these red patches is explained by the colouring of the euphausids and of the diatoms (seaweeds).

Kostya switched off the motor of the racing jet-boat when we reached the striped buoys marking the borders of the pastures, and we skidded over the ruby water for 300 metres. Tavi and Proteus regaled themselves on crayfish as they swam beside us.

Petya Samoilov netted a few euphausids as we went, and began examining them in the stern portable laboratory.

"If the plankton is really dying out," said

Kostya, who was sitting in the wide driver's seat, "then I don't envy the whales. Have to move them to pastures in the Antarctic or the Arctic, though the situation, probably, is no better there. If only we could evolve, genetically, a more hardy race of these stalk-eyed water fleas! But that will take time. Our Matilda, though, could go hungry for a month or two." He shook his head. "But no, everything will be straightened out. We're simply getting into a mild panic. It's impossible that all these small fry will suddenly turn up their toes. After all, they've seen hundreds of supernovae and lived through goodness knows how many other disasters. Want to make a bet? You put up a *Stardust* retort, and I'll take on the trouble of rediscovering the formula and if I lose, of course, I'll write a poem in your honour...."

Kostya was carried away. And I was diverted by Tavi, who swam alongside.

"One of the whale-guards says a herd of killers is coming. It's getting close," whistled Tavi excitedly.

In a moment a dolphin appeared with a scar on the forehead. It was Khokh, one of the whale herd-guards. He had hurried to us as soon as he knew of our approach, and was already transmitting the alarming news over the water.

Khokh had more to add: there were about a hundred killer whales, among them was the Big Killer, that is, Black Jack. They had passed the whale herd at a distance of one kilometre away and were now moving towards the "enclosure" for whale sharks.

Kostya voted that we immediately get on the trail of the "pirates".

"We don't meet Black Jack every day, and we might take him alive."

"Twenty-five minutes have passed," said Petya, holding up a slide with a preparation. "If they've broken in, then we won't be in time to help the whale sharks. Though it's not likely, almost impossible, the defence buoys cover tightly all approaches to the "enclosures". Besides, a strong detail of dolphins are on duty. They sounded "the Alert" long ago; and people on jet-boats should now be there. Or else they're on the way. I'll connect with...."

Petya flopped in his seat, so suddenly did Kostya give the boat the gun.

It was more than 20 miles to the whale shark "enclosure"; the jet-boat made it in half an hour. Tavi, Proteus and Khokh, whom we also took along, had raced ahead and now met us at the defence buoys.

Our marine brothers told us that Black Jack had organized a well-planned raid. His spearhead unit had made a feint attack on the north-east sector. Armed dolphins had been sent there, and jet-boats from the Marine Guard Service. But Jack's main forces had swooped down upon the western sector where, somehow or other, they had managed to turn off the electric current, burst into the "enclosure" and begin chasing out the whale sharks. In panic, the sharks had stampeded for the breach. Many were torn to pieces, but thousands broke through into open waters. Now dolphin troops and all jet-boats had gone after the killer whales.

"Jack won't be caught now," said Petya. "I hope it doesn't lead to the death of more brave dolphins. Jack will sacrifice a few of his

pirates to get rid of his trailers. We need faster jet-boats and more underwater powerful sound locators. How cunning and brainy Jack is in his fight against us."

"Look, the sharks are returning!" cried Kostya, standing upright on the nose cowl of the boat. "The herders are driving them."

"They wouldn't have gone far," said Petya. "Food is plentiful here, but out there it has to be searched for. Big Jack slipped up there. He thought he could hunt them down at his leisure, as soon as the fuss died down."

About a dozen whale sharks were swimming in, surrounded by dolphins. Whale sharks are very handsome. Their brownish grey skin is marked with tiger diagonals, stripes of yellow and white, and is dappled with the same colours. They are majestic and fierce-looking. In appearance, they look even more terrible than the big white sharks. Yet these creatures, which go to twenty-three metres in length, are, in reality, the most inoffensive creatures in the world. They feed exclusively on plankton, scooping water into their mouths through horny, sieve-like plates. Their upkeep costs almost nothing. They are bred as reserves, in case food resources on the planet become scarce. These fish do not yet come under the law that restored the right to live to all man's friends who accompanied him on the long road of development and the struggle with nature. However many societies were organized for the defence of animals inhabiting the seas and rivers. Though it must be said that their members had powerful opposition in the Association of Anglers and Hunters of Water Fowl.

"All the same, why didn't the safeguards work?" inquired Kostya, and then gave a yell, pointing at something. "The red buoy! They tore it loose! Now I get it!"

"I don't. Not quite." And Petya sent Tavi and Khokh down to investigate the bottom near the power cable.

After ten minutes, the scouts surfaced. They had found three dead grampus sabateurs, seen the torn hawsers that held the buoy, and noticed a few white sharks circling round the dead killer whales.

At the very bottom, the voltage of the force field dropped sharply: it could only frighten away oversensitive marine animals. The killers had nosed out this weak spot and, overcoming their fear, bitten through or torn away the hawser. They succeeded only after the third try. The grampuses had gone to their death to open the road for their tribe. It was hungry, so the risk was justified. The death of a few so that many might live is an act of courage. How many such examples there are in the chronicles of mankind!

Meanwhile the whale sharks were entering the "enclosure" in a packed mass. Like all fish of this species, they are great gluttons or, to be more precise, they can never get enough to eat. After an hour's outing in clear water, they were simply dying of hunger, and were now swallowing everything that came their way.

Suddenly, the whale sharks rushed back. Something more powerful than hunger was driving them from the bounteous food.

"Sharks! White sharks!" signalled Tavi.

Not far from our boat the green waters were

becoming blood-red. A few white sharks had attacked a helpless giant and were tearing chunks of flesh from its sides. Dolphins from the guard patrol attacked the predators, and soon finished them off.

The mortally wounded whale shark slowly drifted in a circle, leaving a red trail.

We became witnesses of a tragedy that has been going on for millions and millions of years in the ocean.

A detachment of dolphins arrived about three hundred strong. Without slowing down speed—they had already been alerted on conditions in the “enclosure”—the detachment raced through the opening, swung round in a chain and dived. Tavi, Khokh and Proteus also vanished: they couldn’t desert their brothers in a battle against sharks.

Kostya donned a Robb mask, grabbed a heavy underwater gun and jumped overboard.

“Oh, we’ll catch it from Nilssen!” said Petya, also reaching for a mask.

The three of us swam twenty metres down at the exit from the “enclosure”. Dolphins from the cover patrol dashed round us. When the killers loosened the depth buoy, the force field switched off automatically. But now high voltage was supplied to all lines: only the “gate”, about 100 metres wide, remained unprotected. And it was the only way of retreat for the white sharks.

Tavi swam over to me and whistled something so fast and with such excitement that I didn’t get the message. At the same time, an inconceivable uproar was going on in the water.

Apparently, he said something unflattering

about the sharks, and warned me of danger. Keeping fairly near me, he only occasionally surfaced for air and again returned.

Kostya shot at a white shark going at enormous speed not far away, but missed. Before he pulled the trigger, Tavi darted in at an angle and hit the shark's belly with his nose. Spurring blood, the rammed shark went down quickly.

"Don't dare to shoot!" cried Petya. "You're likely to kill anybody but the shark!"

"Tavi spoiled everything, he got in the way," Kostya defended himself. "Watch out! They're coming! Fast!"

This time he didn't get a chance to shoot once: four sharks were attacked by four dolphins, and were killed. Two of the dolphins were armed with electric harpoons.

I also aimed a few times as a shark swam over me, sighting at the black spot near the thoracic fin, but each time I was too late—the dolphins attacked first. The sharks did not fight back now. Panic-stricken, they saved themselves by flight.

The dolphins fought in a frenzy of ecstasy, ramming to death their age-old enemies.

I heard Kostya's cry of victory. He managed to hit the tail of a shark passing under him. It was at once rammed by a dolphin, and sent to the bottom. Several times, frenzied striped monsters whipped past. These were more to be feared than the white sharks: one slight graze and the skin would be flayed from a good part of your body. It was lucky the dolphins warned us before they came and we swam out of the way, giving the whale sharks a wide berth.

Fewer and fewer white sharks appeared. Somewhere in the depths of the "enclosure", they were surrounded and mercilessly destroyed.

We had now been over an hour in the water.

"Enough for me," said Kostya. "It's not likely anyone will come within shooting distance now." Inflating the light cushion on his back which served as an airbladder, he swam slowly up towards the silvery sky.

Petya also disappeared, kicking his fins. I was attracted by a school of butterfly fish whose colouring was of singular brightness.

Usually, they live in coral growths and near the barrier reef. How did they come to be here, so far from their natural habitat? What had attracted them? They were fluttering in a swarm near a dark spot, a thick clot of blood—the beautiful creatures had come to the battlefield. Who had told them about the fight? Possibly, they had heard the sound of battle and the voices of the dolphins. So that's how news travels so fast underwater.

Thinking this over, I missed Tavi's warning and suddenly felt such a hard nudge that I dropped my gun. Tavi was pushing me out of the path of a ten-metre white shark. It had just been attacked by Proteus and Khokh: wounded in the side, and leaving a red trail, it raced for the "gate".

Tavi pushed me to the surface, whistling and spluttering in rebuke. He was right: one shouldn't gawk with open mouth at "butterflies" when a battle is on.

AIR PATROL

Jack got away from the chase. The killer whales had resorted to their tried and true manoeuvre: after changing course several times, they all scattered in different directions, except ten. These led their pursuers on a false trail for half an hour, then turned and attacked the dolphins. Six killer whales and four dolphins died in the skirmish.

For several days there was no news of Black Jack. But suddenly, the Marine Information Service advised that he had attacked a poorly protected hatchery for gigantic barbels and vanished once more in the ocean vastnesses.

The pirate raids of Black Jack somewhat broke the monotony of life on the island. There was new work to be done. For example, for some days, all the crew of the floating island were busy mounting additional protection buoys on the borders of fish and whale pastures. The electro-glider, which had always stood at rest in its hangar, now soared all day over the ocean: everybody went up in it except Pavel Mefodevich. What a marvellous feeling you had during flight. Its two electric motors were only used to grab height, then their buzzing died out and, giant wings spread, the glider sailed soundlessly over the glassy sheen of the ocean. This apparition looked exactly like a bird. The outlines of its aerofoils had been copied from the wings of the stormy petrel in practically every detail. Sitting in the transparent gondola, I was almost physically aware of the wings. The air seemed quite as boundlessly deep as the ocean, only closer and dearer to the heart.

Now, I have the same respectful regard for the ocean as for space. We receive even more information from the marine depths than from the vast void of the universe, but are unable to digest all the wealth of data. We only accumulate data, investigate and compare information and seek solutions to mysteries. Here in the sky, it all seems as clear as day. How beautiful is the curve of the smooth surface of the blue ocean, or the coral islands on the east that look like a green necklace! Our small "loaf" of an island looked so tiny and cosy, and around it, in the midst of an infinite blue wilderness blooms the colourful embroidered ribbon of our fields. How much energy we must spend to enlarge this oasis!

Kostya whistled, looking through the eyepieces of the optical instruments. One was a bomb-sight of clever design and remarkable precision. They used to be installed in military aircraft for bombing—bombers, they called them. Upon sighting a crowd of killer whales, we use the bomb-sight to drop thousands of ampoules containing a strong alkaloid which we isolated from dark red seaweed. The killers fall into apathy and give themselves up to the marine patrols without resistance. They are then transported to an oceanarium for re-education.

"Never rains but it pours," said Kostya bitterly. "Again a scout! Doesn't Jack realize he mustn't show up in these waters?"

I also didn't want Jack to be caught and shut up in an oceanarium. All the bright, romantic pages of conquering the ocean would go with him. Maybe we could find a way to make

him our ally even without using any stupefying drugs.

To our great joy, down below some of the whale sharks were returning to their "enclosure".

"No, Jack isn't such a fool," said Kostya. "He can feed his tribe on barbels for a long time. What if he chases them into one of the radioactive atolls and sets up his own natural farming? He can't help but know the regions where nuclear explosives were once tested. Radioactivity there is not especially great now. Leukaemia doesn't threaten killer whales. Though it's not likely Jack would hit upon the idea."

As always, Kostya suddenly switched to another topic.

"Soon, Biata will be landing on Earth. Then we'll go to the atolls and live there like primitive man, in a palm-leaf house. We'll catch fish in the lagoon and drink coconut milk. Maybe Vera will come with us. Give it to me straight, lve, do you like her?"

"How many times are you going to ask me? She's real class. Deep, too."

"I know that, without your help. I mean, do you more than like her?"

I said I felt only a friendly interest in her.

"I don't dig your coldness. If I were you, I could go for her."

"You know how I feel about Biata?"

"Yes... but you know how she feels about you." He pursed his lips and sighed, expressing sympathy mixed with regret. Lost in thought, he was torn by doubts. Finally he confessed.

"When I see Biata, all my feelings are concentrated on her, as if focused through the lens of this bomb-sight—but then Vera turns up, and...

well, sometimes I think I've fallen for her, too."

"A tough situation," I sympathized.

Kostya laughed.

"But I'll find a way out!"

The trade-wind had raised our glider to 5000 metres. On the tiny videophone screen appeared the jovial face of Jean Lagrange.

"I hope you don't intend making an altitude record for monoplane gliders today?"

We assured him amicably that it wasn't included in our day's work, and that the wind was to blame.

"That's what I thought. However, in your place I'd drop down a bit." Then he turned to me. "Ive, Thetis is really reacting to the Supernova radiation. Your guess was right. We began reconstructing our working methods and immediately obtained a mass of information!" He nodded. "Happy sailing for another thirty minutes."

In half an hour, Kostya was to land the glider a mile from the whale pastures and we would be relieved by the selectionists: the American, Corrington, and the Greek, Nikolos. They were always either arguing, or else quietly whispering like plotters in a detective film; and they were as inseparable as Lagrange and Singh.

"Must listen to one's elders," sighed Kostya, and put the much-suffering glider into a sharp nose-dive.

The ocean flew up to meet us.

Lagrange appeared again. He said nothing this time, only shook his head and wagged his finger at us.

Kostya came out of the dive and made use of

the speed to do a bit of acrobatic flying, which we would also pay for. Then he furiously skimmed the water, almost clipping a wing against a jet-boat with a relief crew.

We landed.

Smiling, the American raised a clenched fist in a victorious salute to show how much he admired our flying, and patted his small cine-camera, with which he never parted.

"I shot your acrobatics! Nice going." Winking, he nodded at his pal. "Harry's also entranced."

His partner wiped his sweating bald spot with a handkerchief.

"In the old days, they had a special term for abnormal conduct in the air. Yes, sir! Air clowning! Now the terminology isn't so rough, like everything else in our world. All the same, I'd like to point out that you put those around you in danger."

"Drop it, Harry. Life's getting too dull, anyway!" said the American and, slapping Kostya and me on the back, he started climbing into the glider's gondola.

"Why are they always preaching at us!" mumbled Kostya. "On earth, water and in the air!" He laughed boyishly. "Our fellows should have seen it. That Corrington's got a sharp eye: our barrel rolls were really good!"

Tavi jumped out of the water and, splashing us, flew over the boat. It was his way of showing delight at our safe return.

Like all primates of the sea, Tavi was unusually inclined to forming strong attachments. He was lonely if he didn't see me for a while, and when we met after a fairly long parting, he

couldn't keep still for joy. Proteus was on patrol service today, otherwise he would never have left his friend, Kostya.

Association with people has remarkably enriched the sea primates with new conceptions. Possessing perfect memories, they are surprisingly quick at mastering a language and figuring out technical designs. Not one ocean expedition today could get along without them. Dolphins assist in charting the seabeds and currents, prospect for valuable deposits. Thousands of new species of animals have been discovered with their aid. Modern oceanography, with its countless branches of science, would be impossible unless these remarkable creatures took part.

Tavi was a simple-hearted fellow, always gay, happy and ready to do you any favour. He would perform any feat of daring, even though he didn't really know what it meant. Ramming a shark, saving a brother dolphin or man, was for him a simple everyday affair. He couldn't act any other way. The life of his family, race and all the tribe depended on such daily heroism and self-sacrifice. At the same time, this wasn't the inborn, instinctive bravery of animals of low intellect, but sprang from the moral principles instilled in him by his mother, and strengthened by the example of his relatives.

In a dreamy reverie, Kostya drove the jet-boat at slow speed. Tavi swam alongside and related the ocean news. All night he had guarded the whales. In the evening, two miles from the borders of the pasture, sharks had appeared but vanished as soon as they sensed the approach of the dolphins. They went into the depths, knowing their trailers couldn't keep up with

them in the dark levels. Then Tavi told us that the big mother-whale, as he called Matilda, had again begun eating the euphausids and everything that found its way into her "mouth". Also, dead crayfish had stopped falling into the darkness below, like water from the sky. And these events he logically connected with dusting the pastures with bacteria-spore powder which killed the fungi that were parasites on the bodies of the euphausids. Further, in the middle of the night, the patrol had at last followed the trail of the Squid. The latter had again passed under the whale pasture and headed for the hatchery where tuna fish were kept. The Squid had a sweet-tooth for tuna.

It seemed to me that Tavi lacked his former respect in speaking of the Giant Squid which ate common fish. Today, Tavi did not once call him the Giant One. And I was right for he said that this was an ordinary squid although he surpassed in size the very biggest. The Giant One would not lower himself to eat common fish. He should feed on whales and be satisfied with sharks and killer whales only on rare occasions.

"Of course," put in Kostya "No self-respecting mollusc would swallow such small fry as that. For him, you'd have to serve up Matilda for breakfast, Goliath for dinner, and a smaller pair for supper."

Tavi emitted his shrill, rattling sound, and took to his superspeed language (not less than 10 words a second), then fell silent, sticking his head above water and slyly looking at us.

We hadn't understood a word, but Kostya nodded importantly.

"At last you agree with me," he said, "that

there is no such thing as the Giant Squid. Some of them are a bit bigger, others smaller. You're dead right, old chap, all those beliefs arose as a result of the isolation of your people, their reticence and the specific biological features of the species."

Tavi was quick to reply.

"In the ocean, you don't build yourself a glass house and then throw stones!"

Kostya rolled his eyes in surprise, looked at me, and burst out laughing. Tavi flew out of the water, giving clucking sounds: he was laughing too.

KHARITA'S TALE

The sky city of gold and pearl disappeared, writhing in unbearable torment. The glorious palaces came crashing down. The ruins were burning ominously. Then something caved in, and a fountain of sparks flew up in the sky.

Within minutes, all that remained of the former majestic splendour was a narrow band of twilight against the sky. The curtain spattered with stars came slowly down.

The admirers of tropic sunsets dispersed from the platform near the laboratories.

Pavel Mefodevich snapped shut the lid of the old-fashioned case for his camera.

"You have to admit, that ranks as high as anything there is in the fine and decorative arts; I might even say in the jeweller's art. This is how masterpieces are created from almost nothing. No, don't smile, you young people. The material itself is the most commonplace, the

most worthless that exists: water vapour, a mixture of gases of the most trifling 'assortment', as they used to say, a few handfuls of light and dust corpuscles, and that is all. Yet Nature uses these materials every day, and never, never repeats herself. As befits a real creative artist. Nature, my boys, is a genius in this respect. She aims to bring to perfection every tiny particle. Take a snowflake, the flower of the sea-anemone. And the apparel of fish!" He sighed. "Her creations of beauty cannot be numbered. Today, I took the 469th exposure of the sunset. That's my hobby, sunsets. D'you think it's a melancholy pursuit? But just look how brilliantly, unbelievably brilliantly, the day makes its departure! Isn't that an example of..." He broke off.

Along the shore of the lagoon ran an azure-coloured luminescent pathway, resilient underfoot, and we walked along it. The lagoon was also faintly luminous. From the opposite shore came the splashing and whistling of the dolphins playing water polo. There, the water foamed with green fire.

"I didn't know shooting sunsets was your hobby," said Kostya. "I left some films at home. Taken in the Himalayas. What sunsets you see there! If you like, I'll have them sent to you."

"Thanks. I'd be glad to have them, though, personally, I prefer the more humid latitudes. In the rarer atmospheres, sunsets are poorer in the sense of pictorial technique, but unusually brilliant. I should say that, in those parts, you find the primitive artist at work." He laughed, pleased with his rather apt metaphor.

We entered one of the smaller laboratories.

Dozens of the kind—where Pavel Mefodevich and his assistants worked—were scattered along the mooring wall of the lagoon. Their modern equipment permitted one to observe the sea primates in their natural habitat.

The Academician invited us to sit down, and also settled himself in an easy chair near the telescreen which he switched on. Visibility was very good, though no artificial lighting was used. At night, primates of the sea cannot bear strong light. Under the spotlight, they feel helpless within the surrounding darkness, so full of danger. Though there is nothing to be afraid of in the lagoon, nevertheless the dolphins cannot overcome their subconscious sense of danger lying in wait outside a blinding ray of light.

Over the hydrophone, at first we heard the dolphins carrying on an ordinary conversation; the uninitiated would interpret the sounds as signals resembling the twittering of birds.

"I've taped a large number of interesting stories in this lab," said Pavel Mefodevich. "Almost everything that went into my book was overheard in one of these labs or else out at sea. Remember in Chapter 25 how the mother dolphin teaches her children to count? That was Khari-ta, and I taped her lesson right in this room. And, I might add, we are introducing her methods into the schools for sea primates, in their curricula for the first two cycles. Incidentally, as regards eavesdropping, I must tell you that we don't break any regulations. These large-headed mammals have no secrets, mysteries, jealousies or the desire to dominate: they eagerly share their knowledge. Besides, the taping of questions inevitably results in a dryness, a

formalistic tone, the more so that our specialists in electronic equipment, so far, are only nearing the creation of tolerable electronic interpreter. The present joint-circuit-relay is still inexact and full of a libbing. Sometimes, it makes up word combinations impossible to find in any dictionary. But let's listen to what the wise Kharita will tell us today, listen to this sister of ours, attractive, joyous and beautiful. There she is! See, the one with the two tiny tots. The adult audience is growing: they have also brought their children. At present, Kharita talks only to adults and children—the other youngsters and teenagers receive information the same way that we do, in school cycles. For them, Kharita is becoming an anachronism.

Half submerged in the water, Kharita lay on the wide balcony shelf covered with synthetic sponge. It was here that the mothers and babies spent the night, here the youngsters gathered, schools and clubs functioned.

The joint-circuit-relay picked up the pleasant, chest timbres of feminine voices. At first, it translated everything that was spoken everywhere, including the noise.

Words rang from the hydrophone.

"Whoever behaves badly will be carried off by a cuttle-fish."

"Where?"

"Where it's dark and cold...."

"Silence! Silence!"

"Khokh has returned!"

"Khokh! Khokh! Khokh!"

There followed a long, meaningless sentence.

"Did you hear that?" Pavel Mefodevich raised a warning finger. "Probably, the machine is at-

tempting to translate an unprogrammed dialect. We have many newcomers from the Caribbean Sea and Oceania, and a group from the Mediterranean. But what a machine! Didn't stop for a single minute, but sent out some kind of gibberish. Perhaps it finds some sense in it! Thinking machines are the topic of the day now...."

Kostya, a supporter of emotional robots, started a hot defence of this idea but, to his regret, had to stop. The joint-circuit-relay was translating Kharita's opening words.

"I shall speak. You will listen. You will pass it on to others, so they will know the truth about peoples of the land and the seas."

On the telescreen, a group of dolphins were rocking on the buoyant, transparent water. They looked as if they were sleeping with wide-open eyes. Glancing at Kharita, you could hardly have guessed she was telling the story, and only her lively, beautiful eyes betrayed the working of her thoughts.

The talk was made on the ultra-short-wave band.

It was a word by word translation made from a very difficult language and retained only the basic ideas of the original. Therefore, as with Tavi's stories, I had to edit it somewhat.

"The Ocean always existed, and over it always floated the round hot fish that sends us light and warmth, and gives life to all who swim, fly, or move across the land or the deeps. People call this fish the sun.

"The Ocean is round, like a very big drop of water. It also floats among luminescent fish, in another ocean that is above us, where only birds may fly a long time. The Ocean does not

let us leave it, just as a mother won't let her children stray far away. Listen to the great misfortune that befell the children of the Ocean, and how this misfortune turned into a blessing.

"It happened a long, very long time ago. Since that time, the sun has risen from the Ocean and fallen into it an eternal number of times, in order to drink and hunt the golden mackerel. For the present, it is difficult for you to understand what eternity is. Since those days, let us say, as much time has passed as a whale would need to drink the Ocean dry. I know that's not a very good example. Here's another: you have all been in the red water where the whales swim, and you've seen how many tiny living creatures are there. If they were all counted, you would get a great sum. And all the same, this sum would not be eternity, but only its beginning.

"In that far off time, a strong storm blew up. When the Ocean permits its wave-children to play with the wind, one must hurry away from the shore. The waves, against their wish, might throw you up against sharp rocks which jut out like the teeth of the killer whales. One must always swim away from the shore, when the waves play with the wind."

"Everybody knows that."

"Right, Ko-ki-ekkh, your mothers teach you to swim from the shore where there are many fish and many dangers. Always beside the good, swim the bad. The children of the Ocean knew that on the day of the great storm. Many managed to get away from the shore, but a few remained."

"Didn't they listen to their elders?"

"There were no children there. Only the very strongest and the bravest. They wanted to find out what was beyond the cliffs, and why the waves ran there with such joy and strove to leap over the high barriers. 'Probably, beyond this firm land and rocks, there is a lagoon which has more fish than there are in the Ocean,' thought the brave ones. And they all swam ahead as if they had seen white sharks there."

"And they all died, like the jellyfish, sea-urchins, starfish and sea grasses do, when the waves toss them ashore?"

"No, my little inquisitive, Ko-ki-ekh. They stayed alive. Very much time passed, and the brave ones evolved into humans."

"Quick, Kharita, tell us how they turned into humans!"

"Very simple, impatient Ko-ki-ekh. The same as you get fish from fish-roe and a bird from a round egg. It was even easier for them to turn into humans. Their flippers cracked open and grew longer, becoming arms; and the tail stretched out and turned into legs."

"How ugly they are, they can't swim the least bit!"

"Be quiet, Ko-ki-ekh. Yes, one must admit that they lost much, though their hands created both the island and the soft sponge you are lying upon, and the arrows that strike the sharks and the killer whales; and have created much more than what we saw with our own eyes."

"Which is the stronger—man or the Giant Squid?" questioned Ko-ki-ekh, to the whispered approval of companions his own age.

"You will soon decide for yourself which is the stronger, my little Ko-ki-ekh. But please

don't interrupt me, or I won't manage to tell everything you need to know before the sun floats up out of the Ocean. You've already heard how our brothers changed, when they found themselves on dry land. I must also add that the beautiful heads with which we so easily catch fish and ram our enemies also changed and became round."

"Round as a jellyfish," put in the tireless Ko-ki-ekh.

"All the same, I wouldn't want such a misfortune to happen to my children," said one of the mother-dolphins.

"One mustn't form conclusions without knowing everything; but in one thing you are right, Eykh-y-yi. At first, it was hard for them. Helpless and pitiful, they crawled to the shores of the Ocean, threw themselves into the water, and found out they couldn't swim as before, and in this, you are right, Ko-ki-ekh. Sharks stopped being afraid of people, attacked them, and many humans would have devoured if we didn't happen to be near by. We always defended our helpless brothers. If they swam far from shore and growing tired sank into the dark depths, we would lift them up and help them reach shore where they had to endure so many disasters. And yet they were better off on land than out in the dark where the Giant Squid lives.

"For a long time, humans remembered that we were their brothers and that we both had the same father, the Ocean. To be with us, they built themselves shells and sailed in them away from shore."

"Like the molluscs?"

"Yes, Ko-ki-ekh. Remember, everyone, that

the shells which people swim or float in are called piragua or canoe, boat, catamaran, raft, ship; and they have many other names, too. We arranged great hunts together. People would fill their shells with fish and sail to the land. We would accompany them until the sand or the sharp coral touched our bellies. Women and children used to wait for us on the shore. They would often come into the water and caress us, stroking our backs.

"Many a time did the sun float up from the Ocean and, tired, fall into it. Many storms there were, and fine days. A countless number of times the fish laid their roe in the sand or fastened it to seaweeds, out of which came the spawn, the fry, which later grew up into fish.

"One day when the children of the Ocean swam to the land, people no longer came to meet them in their shells. The children of the Ocean began calling them. Nobody answered. A terrible thing had happened: humans had forgotten the language of their brothers...."

The saga of suffering of the people who had lost contact with their brothers took up more than two hours. The Ocean met his prodigal sons with a frown; he could not forgive the fact that his children had exchanged the free waves for the gloomy cliffs and sandy shores, overgrown with trees as hard as stone. Kharita described many catastrophes: ships as big as islands disappearing into the eternal night, the drowning of junks, boats, yachts, barques. The hearts of the dolphins broke at the sight of these terrible scenes of death, but they rarely managed to save anybody. People were terrified at the sight of dolphins and took them for sharks.

Kharita cited a few examples of touching friendship, too. Children were the first to realize that dolphins would do them no harm. Through them, the first contacts were made, and again went out like weak sparks smothered by man's deep enmity to all the living creatures.

But at last the scales fell from the eyes and hearts of people. They recalled the language of their brothers, and everything became as it used to be in the long ago before the first terrible storm arose.

Kharita finished her speech with a hymn of joy, glorifying the coming of everlasting happiness for all children of the Ocean.

"I never heard anything like it! I never could have imagined it!" exclaimed Kostya, when Pavel Mefodevich had thanked Kharita and turned off the interpreter.

"Where else could you hear such a thing?" he replied, with a smile. "Only here. Yes, the old girl was in good form to-night. You understood the philosophical subtext? Any knowledge must be dearly paid for. Especially by pioneer explorers. It's an old maxim, and you're right in thinking that it's amazing to hear it from our brothers by intellect."

"That may be so, Pavel Mefodevich." Kostya went over and stood beside him. "Philosophy, and poetry, and an old maxim—all these, perhaps, are to be found in the myth we just heard. But I expected something else."

"What?"

"The truth. Your Kharita's a liar. I don't believe she doesn't know about the crimes of people against her own kind. Our forefathers annihilated them by the hundreds of thousands

for their blubber and skins. I read in an old book that dolphins were simply killed for the fun of it, for sport, and it wasn't considered a crime! How is it possible to forget all that, and make a fairy story out of it? Or was it done on purpose, with a pedagogical aim? Because, tonight she was telling it to children!"

"The grown-ups liked to hear it, too. And if you tried to tell them the truth, they simply wouldn't believe it. According to their notions, man cannot do any harm to dolphins. He is their brother, friend, ally. Later on, sometime, they will realize the cruel, historical truth, just as you do. And, the same as you, they will look upon it with an indulgence. It is natural for an intelligent creature to consider any cataclysm from the viewpoint of his time, basing his outlook upon modern conditions of life, on the affirmation of contemporary moral standards."

We went out of the lab into the dark, sultry night. The wind brought no coolness.

A detachment of the dolphin patrol burst into the lagoon with splashing and snorting. Their bodies gleamed.

I was wholly under the influence of Kharita's story and Kostya's hot tirade. I wanted to be alone, to sort it all out, and to speak with Biata. My eyes searched for her sputnik, but couldn't find it.

Kostya guessed what I was looking for.

"Clouds...." he said.

Pavel Mefodevich stood silent for a minute, and in the silence you could hear the hollow ticking in his chest. Then he took Kostya's arm.

"What you called a lie was actually poetry. And poets have never been liars."

Satisfied with this paradox, he gave his chuckling laugh, the same sound dolphins make when imitating man, and quickly went off along the blue pathway.

Kostya whispered, almost inaudibly: "Clear as day. He has the brain of a dolphin. As for the rest, you can guess...."

THE STRANGE MUTANT

Proteus told us there was an untagged shark a hundred metres away. I reduced speed. Kostya held his gun ready. The jet-boat rocked quite a bit. Kostya stood on the foredeck, feet planted wide apart.

"Steady the helm! There he goes, the darling rascal!" He threw up the gun and shot, almost without aiming. The dart went in near the dorsal fin, the small black and yellow flag fluttering in the wind at the end of the dart.

"A hit!" said Kostya, a bit hoarsely. "Not one miss! And you said no go!"

Though I'd said no such thing, I nodded agreement, won by his sudden show of unusual marksmanship.

"Sharks off stern!" signalled one of the dolphin scouts.

I spun the jet-boat round on the spot, and drove at very low speed, keeping sharp watch through the wind screen. The sharks moved to meet us. One already had a flag dart jutting out on one side, the other had none.

"That's your work!" said Kostya. "Too bad! Whoever puts an ampoule in the side? You can't

see them at all. If we were on the other side, I could give it one more dose."

The dart whistled.

"A hit!" Kostya yelled, and took a deep breath, almost bursting with pride.

No two ways about it, he'd become a champion at shooting the vaccine darts.

"Four sharks!" I heard Tavi's signal and, at a snail's pace, I headed towards the call, doing no more than ten miles an hour. High speed could cause an accident: now and then across our bow flashed the tiger back of a whale shark, and I had to make a sharp turn or slow down, almost to a complete stop. All the sharks we met bore flag darts. They would stay in the shark a further 48 hours until we finished the vaccination. During that time, the vaccine would dissolve in their lymph and the dart be washed off by the water.

After the protective inoculation of the whales, slight changes had been observed in the blood of whale sharks. There was no illness as yet, but it might quickly crop up, and then we might lose an enormous reserve of life biomass. The vaccine increased the vital activity of the blood-forming organs and helped develop immunity to malignant effects of degeneration of the tissues and to various infectious diseases. Such inoculations had also been carried out before, primarily as a prophylactic measure.

Petya Samoilov's jolly face showed on the videophone screen.

"How are things?" he asked.

"Couldn't be better! Kostya's just finishing his sports drill in marksmanship."

"Sports! I like that!" said Kostya, indignantly.

"I can hardly lift my arm.... Aha! I guess that's the last but one." A shot rang out. "A hit!"

"As marksmen," said Petya, "we don't shine like you and Kostya, I've. Looks like you'll have to work with us."

"Oh, you're a sharp one, you are!" answered a flattered Kostya.

"Your fame has spread all over the ocean. The sea primates reported it here, and even in the chlorella pastures. Even so, don't get too puffed up over it; we've also got something to brag about. Take a look!"

On the screen appeared an odd-coloured "Portuguese Man-of-War"—a coelenterate belonging to the Medusa or jellyfish family. The ordinary man-of-war is a bluish-rose colour with a rosy serrated crest, but these were vivid red, speckled with black.

"Pat us on the back. A new species!" said Petya.

So we congratulated Khi and Petya on their rare find.

"So, we'll expect some help from you," smiled Petya from the screen, and you could see how anxious he was to talk about the 'Portuguese Man-of-War'. "It's not just their unusual colour; the shape of the crests is not quite the same," he added, and invited us to drop in at his "enclosure".

"Some people are lucky!" Kostya said and aimed at the next shark. "That's something to think about...."

A whole detachment of dolphins were helping us besides Tavi, Proteus and Khokh. They combed the "enclosure" on a wide front and, finding a shark without a flag, passed the news back to

us along the chain. Our work was made easier because of the plentiful food, so that the sharks didn't have to search all over the "enclosure" but could pasture back and forth over a fairly small sector and keep in the upper waters most of the time.

Standing on the foredeck, legs set wide apart for balance, Kostya stared into the distance, squinting his eyes under the jutting green peak of his cap. In his snow-white shorts and shirt, he reminded you of an old-time hunter whose family, relatives and entire tribe depended for their living on his steady arm and sharp eyes, on his strength and endurance. Kostya was born with all these gifts in good measure. Instilled in the cells of his nerve tissues, they had lain dormant till now and were just awakening. These thoughts, by analogy, carried me to my laboratory, to the last microfilm I'd looked at with Pavel Mefodevich.

"Tut, tut, tut! Now then, run it through once more," he had asked, and studied it carefully from the beginning. "Well, my friend, something is turning up here. Did you notice what your virus is up to?"

I confessed I couldn't see anything new. I was quite content with what I had observed, and had made new tests to confirm the previous results.

"Dear boy! You're like a greenhorn prospector for gold: you wash the sand and are happy to get a few small nuggets, not realizing that if you dug one metre deeper you would strike the mother lode. Now then, run it again, and perhaps we'll find that rich vein."

We began to watch the film a third time.

"These frames show no virus at all, you've killed it," continued Pavel Mefodevich. "And you see what happened to the cell? Its vital processes have been inhibited. Why?"

"The products of disintegration..."

"... acted on the cell?"

"Yes... maybe...."

"And what if the cell cannot do without the virus in a prolonged symbiosis? Suppose it performs certain vitally important functions?"

"Enzymatic?"

"Possibly. The cell forced the parasite to work. It became a domestic animal. It's possible, isn't it? Nature can play many a fine trick...."

"Ivan! What's wrong, you asleep? Almost ran over a shark." Kostya brought me back from the lab. "Here I've been talking to him for five minutes, and he acts as if he's in a trance. What's up? Are you so wrapped up in that virus of yours, you can't leave it alone?"

I tried to explain to him our suppositions on that account, but Kostya waved them away.

"Enzymes! Catalysts! Dialectical change-over! You've been dinning it into my ears all morning. Have a heart! I don't drive you crazy every minute with atoms of heavy metals; and things are more complicated in that field.... Don't argue! The old man said I'd got a hard nut to crack.... Stop! Full reverse!"

After making a few shots, Kostya sat down beside me.

"Imagine! Vera called me up yesterday at 11.10 p.m.," he said, trying to hide his embarrassment. "I looked up, and there she was smiling from the 'viddy'."

"Congratulations! At 11.10 p.m. Not every girl would risk having a date at that time!"

"Don't get smart. It was a business talk. We agreed to keep each other informed about everything important. Yesterday, their mimososaurs started walking about. That's what they call their new species of *mimosa*. Do you realize how important the discovery is? They've found a transitional link between plants and animals! A sensation! The whole world's talking about it today. Is that ever a discovery! We've nothing like it. Vera even talked about it on the *Albatross*. Remember? But then it was still a scientific secret. There were many things to clear up. And suddenly, they started to walk. She showed me one mimososaur. Pretty good name, too! Just an ordinary plant to look at. Nothing out of the way! About this size," and he showed how small it was with his hands. "No more than twenty centimetres tall, leaves narrow and glossy, and a mass of tendrils like air roots. Nothing special to look at. But one only has to change the conditions.... Vera shut it off from the light and, can you imagine, the tendril-feet—or call them arms, if you want—pressed against the ground, pulled out the small root, and it crawled! Reaching the light, it again settled down and the root went into the soil. Pretty good, what? Now I know why Mokimoto didn't want to come to our island, and left two days after he got here. He simply didn't want to offend our old man. But I haven't told you the most interesting bit. You know why the mimososaur started to crawl? Pure chance, that classical occurrence! A mistake was made, an error in the experimental methods. Vera has worked

with Mokimoto since she was a first year student, and it was then that she planted several valuable seeds. She simply ran out of flower-pots, there weren't any around, so she stuck the seeds into ordinary soil near the greenhouse. And forgot all about them. When she did remember, she decided to let them grow and see what would come of it. Incidentally, Mokimoto had given strict orders to stick to the methods he had worked out. No unauthorized influences were to be permitted. He was especially afraid of radiation from the Supernova. He was one of the first to discover its effect on the growth and development of plants. He was afraid the rays would spoil all their planning, break the hereditary mechanism which functioned, from generation to generation, within calculated limits.

"And everything turned out in reverse: the mimososaurs ('saurians') started crawling, all right. But only the ones Vera had planted outside. The others continue to develop according to the set methods. They wave their tendrils, set them against the ground—but, so far, not a single move out of them! You know what Mokimoto said to Vera? 'What brilliant carelessness! Only try not to repeat it too often. Such things happen once in a hundred years.'"

Kostya shot, and missed.

Proteus swam up with the dart in his mouth.

"You're beginning to shoot like Ivan, Petya and Khi," he said, passing it to Kostya.

That was an open dig.

Kostya rubbed his eyes.

"Spray got in my eyes.... In a minute, Proteus, you'll see a real shot!"

Again he missed.

Kostya started twirling the gun in his hand, frowning with annoyance. Then he smiled.

"Got distracted by those mimososaurs...."

Out of habit, I started explaining the reasons for the bad shot.

Kostya sent a dart into a shark, and looked at me with a smile. When I finished analysing his emotional condition, he dismissed it with a wave of the hand.

"Sheer nonsense, old fellow. All your proprioceptors and ideal coordination of the nervous impulses, and their temporary discord. I never was keen on shooting so I didn't develop set habits to get out of order. I was simply distracted by the walking bushes.... See, another hit! If you want to know, I have an inborn talent for this atavistic business. One of my distant forefathers, actually my grandfather, was a hunter and also took part in numerous wars. You saw his portrait. In some ways, he reminds me of our old man, apart from his beard. A certain special confidence and expectation of something in his eye! You noticed Mefodevich seems to be waiting for something all the time?"

"He's very old.... And, generally speaking, is he a man in the pure sense of the word?"

"Maybe something in him isn't normal, some organs are replaced by mechanical devices. But he has the brain of man or dolphin, no doubt about it, for not one electronic design possesses such supple thinking power. And you know the strangest thing about him?"

"Everything is strange about him. Very odd."

"Right, but the chief thing is that he, in some ways, is younger than you or I, only he's cleverer and wiser. Both he and my grandfather—they

look ahead, through the centuries, in confident expectation.... I'm also waiting for something. Sometimes, with alarm; sometimes, with hope. And you?"

"Naturally. We're always striving for something and waiting for the end results. Now the whole world is waiting for the Supernova to flow up. What will it bring us? Biata's afraid all mankind will become extinct, like the giant reptiles in the carboniferous period."

"Those are all temporary phenomena, mere episodes," frowned Kostya. "See here, I think a bit different about life, that is, from the philosophical aspect. In general, I think of it as a great expectation of something or other."

I didn't get him. Again Kostya had showed me a new side of his character. I had never thought him capable of abstract thinking, unconnected with everyday interests.

"You don't say," I remarked vaguely.

But Kostya was already the same as ever, and suddenly switched to a new topic.

"This morning I met Hera, Nilssen's wife. Flew in for a week. Looks at us as if we were ancient heroes, and worships her dear Karl. We went swimming. Proteus got a crush on her right away, and she was terrified of him, but didn't show it. Though, when Proteus called her by name, she almost fainted. After we left the water, she admitted she couldn't convince herself that such fish-shaped creatures were intelligent, and surpassed us in some ways. You know, she's an Egyptologist and translated a papyrus, a fragment of a chronicle about celestial phenomena. And, imagine, mention was made of the flare-up of a supernova...."

Over the hydrophone came a typical, smacking gurgle. Then a voice:

"This is Tavi. No more sharks without flags in the western sector."

"Look harder," said Kostya. "I've still got ten darts left. Head east. We'll wait for you at the reefs."

"Roger."

Ten metres under us stretched a coral reef. The bottom appeared dimly through the sun-dappled waters.

Kostya undressed, donned a mask, and took up a harpoon.

"Somehow, I feel dried up in this murderous sun; have to change my habitat. Apart from toning up the nerves and restoring normal humidity, there's something that draws me to these particular depths. Once, I went exploring here with Proteus and Khokh. What a coral forest, and what seaweeds! Too bad I didn't have an underwater camera along. What about you?" Not waiting for an answer, he jumped overboard.

I didn't feel like it. How good it was to day-dream here in this comfortable seat! The jet-boat rhythmically rocked on the gentle swell. When it rose on the crest of a wave, I saw a white refrigerator ship, one of the flotilla servicing our island. Every day, these ships carried away the sea products processed at our factories. Somewhere in the azure skies there was the whine of an air liner. All this somewhat distracted me from giving any thought to Kostya. It seemed, at first, as though I was thinking only of him, but our interests were so interwoven that everything affecting his life and inclinations was just as tightly linked with mine.

A moment ago he had been telling me about

Vera's mimososaurs. A discovery which, for a time, put the Supernova off the map. The news was probably flooding all tele-channels. But Kostya gave the event a sort of intimate tone. And he seemed a bit put out because I didn't appear to have a special interest in the discovery, or in Vera.

Why did he want me to feel different towards her than I did? Well, he was sure everything was over between Biata and me, and thought he was the reason. He had wanted to make it up to me. Dear old Kostya!

The trade-wind awakened. Its breath ruffled the glossy surface of the slow swell, and started to come in gusts. I had the strange feeling that something had suddenly changed in this world. Indeed, the sky turned pallid, clouds ran and put out the sun. A cheerless whistling and splashing broke out all round: the sea and the wind began to quarrel.

Such weather makes me melancholy. And I began blaming Biata for not giving me a thought. In spite of all the overloaded communication channels up there in the observatory, she might have found a minute for a video-call or, at least, a short photogram. No, something's wrong somewhere. The next time we meet, I'll have it out with her. Better the bitter truth than the torment of not knowing! Then it occurred to me that I was positively tortured by her. But I wasn't being fair: you see, last winter she had told me: 'I know how you feel, but don't talk about it any more. I'm still not sure. When I am, I'll tell you myself. Okay?'

That "Okay", for me, held a sort of promise; almost a "yes". I began thinking how mixed up life was, and about happiness, which would

be meaningless without Biata. And I got so down in the dumps that I wanted to throw myself into the sea, after Kostya.

There is no better way of getting back on an even keel than by skin-diving in the depths of the sea. Earthly afflictions give way before the flood of new impressions and seem insignificant in the greenish-blue waterworld....

Over the very surface of the rolling sea slipped a stormy petrel, spreading his motionless narrow wings. The personification of loneliness. He and the ocean—and nobody else in the whole world! I liked this allegory, for I felt I was a lone wanderer no less than he.

I started making up free verse on the everlasting search for happiness, and was interrupted by Tavi and Proteus. They leaped suddenly out of the water and, dripping spray, flew over the patrol boat. They had noticed my drooping figure at a distance and, thinking I was dozing, decided to wake me up in this fashion. The scouts brought news of finding five sharks, still unvaccinated, two miles away.

I sent the dolphins after Kostya. In a few minutes, Proteus returned alone and hurriedly transmitted Kostya's answer.

"The devil with the sharks! There're more interesting things down here than those fat dum-mies. Let Ivan join me at once. If, of course, you can wake up that lazybones and tramp. I guess you'll find a way to throw him overboard."

Proteus transmitted all this without concealing his enjoyment. He clapped his flippers on the water and playful sparks gleamed in his eyes.

"In the first place, he's the tramp, and you can tell him so."

"Will do. And what else?"

"That's all, for now. Better tell me, what's going on down there?"

Instead of answering, the messenger drew air in his lungs with a whistle and, showing me his tail, vanished underwater.

I was already overboard when Tavi swam up to me, stopped to be hugged, and gave me his fin. He led me over a motionless coral forest, frightening the black and yellow Sergeant-Majors, the tangfishes resembling dark blue plates, butterfly fish and schools of small fry. At our approach, they flew in all directions like multicoloured spray.

Then I asked Tavi what was up.

He hadn't noticed anything special except an enormous crowd of parrot fish—always numerous in places like this—and one more fish, uneatable, which in Tavi's opinion didn't deserve special attention.

Kostya hung among the swaying seaweeds, holding on to a coral branch.

"Hurry up!" he called impatiently through his hydro-talkie. "I've been trying to contact you for fifteen minutes. You turned off the hydrophone again?"

"Not me, you turned it off."

"My cursed absent-mindedness! You're absolutely right! I was so anxious to get down into the silence here, and not have to listen to your preachy grumbling. Don't argue, at least, not now. Or else this lovely creature will get away from us. Tavi! Proteus! Swim off about fifty metres, otherwise the fish won't believe in your peaceful intentions."

"We'll be within fifty metres of you," Tavi

assured him, adding: "That fish has a poisonous spine and nobody eats its flesh, not even sharks."

"How do you know?"

"Everybody knows," answered Proteus, as he swam off with Tavi after him. Both were clearly offended.

"Do their explanations mean anything to you?" asked Kostya.

"Not a thing."

"And yet their feelings are hurt! I noticed this monster quite by accident. Try not to twitch your feet and don't talk, for a minute at least, or else keep the mike turned down. Take it as a sacrifice you're making on the altar of science."

From all the holes, cracks and openings suddenly appeared beautiful trunk-fish and parrot fish. Many "parrots" in particular.

With their white teeth, they began energetically to gnaw the seaweeds from the coral growths. The heads of parrot fish have an amusingly stupid look—they remind you of herbivorous creatures from the fantastic planets, where there are quite different conceptions of suitable form and content.

"Where are you looking?" whispered Kostya. "Those are quite normal creatures. Turn your head to the right. Right, not left!"

At last I saw the creature which was to haunt me for long afterwards.

Anyone used to the ocean isn't easily surprised at the sight of the extraordinary in form and colour—but what I saw now exceeded the most daring imagination. In comparison with this startling monster, parrot fish and trunk-fish were absolutely normal. Imagine a creature that combines fish, bird, reptile and mammal all

rolled into one. On its fat, porky torso grew a horny ridge, the four belly fins looked like the legs of a cormorant and in place of the usual fishtail extended a sharp spine, the continuation of the spinal ridge.

A glance at the creature's head left an especially strong impression! Elongated, like the snout of a boar with jutting teeth, blunt and evil looking. But its bulging eyes were a wonderful golden topaz. And if the shape of the creature was repulsive, then its colours were pure elegance—ultramarine, crimson and gold were the main hues which ornamented its exterior.

"Well, what do you say now?" asked Kostya. "It's out of this world! Some baby!" Kostya threw me a critical look. "Naturally, you didn't think to bring the crossbow with you? Have to make do with a harpoon."

Without thinking twice, and ignoring my protests, he pierced the strange fish with a harpoon. Almost at once, Tavi and Proteus appeared. They shot past us, giving advice.

"Don't let go of the shaft... the fish might slip into a crevice in the coral. Watch out for the spine!" The last warning was meant for me. Forgetting all caution, I had almost caught the spine with my hands, and it was studded with poisonous needles.

Kostya whirled like an acrobat, not letting go of the harpoon shaft. Finally, I went to his aid. Together, with difficulty, we pulled our game to the surface while the dolphins, expertly evading the spine, pushed it from under the body with their noses.

In the air, when we hauled it onto the foredeck, the fish faded before our eyes. The colours lost

their recent brightness, and only the eyes retained the purity and gleam of golden topaz. Kostya, at last, got his breath back.

"Don't you think they're all very much alike—the 'mimososaur', the 'Portuguese Man-of-War', and this 'pig-bird-lizard'?"

TO THE WHISTLE OF THE TRADE-WIND

"Its pseudo-legs harden, and now it is very like a radiolarian," said Kostya. "I wonder how it'll get out of the predicament."

The film frames slipped by on the screen, and the amoebae were changing their shape completely. After the next division, their hair-like cilia grew all the harder.

New shots: one of the amoeba's descendants began to resemble a sea-urchin.

"The acquisition of new properties," the announcer explained, "which are not based on conditions of existence, puts the animal in a critical position."

"Will it really get out of it?" asked Kostya. "Not likely! The cilia will be the death of that beauty.... I told you so!"

The creature—now it couldn't be distinguished from a sea-urchin—froze motionless on the screen.

"The tragedy is over," continued the announcer, sadly. "The amoebae hadn't sufficient vital forces to stand out against radiation. They couldn't recover the loss of molecules in the chains of nucleic acids. Their kinsmen are in a more advantageous position."

Among the sea-urchins seen on the bright-grey background of the screen, there appeared

completely normal rhizopods. They slowly changed their shape, expanding and contracting, enveloping bacteria with their bodies, dividing to produce exact replicas of themselves.

"Turn it off," said Kostya. "It's perfectly clear. Some have lost their primary immunity against radiation, others have been preserving it from the time radiation was a simple necessity as a source of energy for existence. The old story. Turn it off, and don't let it bother your conscience. Now they will show all this on molecular levels. Are you going to turn it off or...." He reached towards the screen, half rose, and sat down again.

I wanted to see all the film. Kostya wasn't right in saying that everything was clear. The first part of the film had certainly been familiar and did not shine with originality, but the continuation promised something new. The name of the programme was enough: "New Data about the Influence of Radiation on the Hereditary Factors of the Cell".

There was no stopping Kostya, however.

"Try to get over your born laziness, or else have Penelope do it."

"Penelope's getting recharged, and you know perfectly well that she's forbidden to do such a delicate manipulation."

Penelope appeared at the door. Her eye blinked with inquiry. Behind her dragged the cord and electric plug.

"There, you see!" cried Kostya, happily. "Penelope dear, turn off that machine. It's so full of noise and single-cell organisms."

Penelope's eye blinked even faster.

I had to interfere, so as not to torment the

poor thing. I sent her to bring us tea. This she did with her usual haste, only this time she didn't break or spill anything.

Kostya turned his back on the screen and, thanking Penelope, took a cup of tea.

"You were lucky today to be on duty in the deckhouse," he said, sipping his tea. "But we had a hard time of it. That is, Pavel Mefodevich and I. With a whole troop of dolphins in tow, we went to the "atom atolls", in search of new mutants. Found nothing worthwhile. That made the old man happy. He said our affairs weren't so bad off as some people think. Old Mother Earth has an inexhaustible store of energy, and where fluctuations from the norm are concerned Pavel Mefodevich regards them as experiments staged by that still mysterious miracle which we call life. He philosophized a lot and was in a very good mood the whole time. Does he get it from a well-trained will or is he guided by programming? And how he can work! No, sir. I wouldn't be so good at playing the role of an eminent scientist and a happy man, knowing I was stuffed with transistors."

Meanwhile, the programme on the screen continued to show the intimate life of the cell. From a chaos of molecules grew gigantic spheres. Expanding, they quivered from the hidden power inside. Suddenly, their envelopes flew apart in a shower of spray, and were born again from the shining small droplets. It was the synthesis of protein....

"You're forgetting the laws of hospitality," said Kostya sleepily. "My eyes are filled with a sort of jumble of amoebae, protoplasms, ribosomes, and pig-bird-lizards. Let's listen to the

strom, instead. What a solemn voice that announcer has, like a high priest's.... Listen to that trade wind sing! At long last it's stopped its sentimental whispering! You watch, it wants to tear our island off the mooring chains."

"How frightened our ancestors must have been, if even now fear and respect for the elements are preserved in our subconscious mind," I said, "although we know we are absolutely safe. Can you imagine how it was when people were caught unawares by a storm among the naked cliffs or in the steppes. Night! Lightning piercing the very earth, boulders crashing and melting, the ground shaking. Cold torrents falling like a solid wall. You could die of fright if you didn't know the cause of all those horrors! Just the same, people stood up to more than one storm. How, you ask? They overcame fear. I can picture the Eldest in the clan, wrapped in the skin of a cave bear, standing over his fellow tribesmen, who fell flat on the ground, and threatening the sky with a stone axe. I think nobody has ever painted a canvas or made a sculptural group, or viewing-tape on such a theme. It would be worth it. Remember what Pavel Mefodevich said? 'All that is in you—your mind, strength and ability to tell beauty from ugliness, to struggle and win—are not yours. They are a legacy from your ancestors; and you, having amassed it, will pass it on to your descendants.'"

I also had stopped looking at the screen. In fact, everything the image showed now seemed shallow to me, unimportant in comparison with the storm shaking the island, and the picture Kostya had conjured up. Tiredness, of course, had something to do with it. Have to send Kos-

tya off to bed, I thought. Take a shower and tumble in, too.

Of a sudden, there was a break in the programme and the turbulent cells vanished. For a few seconds, the screen shimmered like an empty blue field, then I saw Mum, Grandad and Kate.

Kostya and I jumped up and ran over to the screen. Mum smiled somewhat guiltily.

Grandad looked us over suspiciously. Kate waved, her face shining.

"Ive! Kostya! Yesterday they showed your piglet-lizard. What a poor little thing! How could you ever kill it?"

"You never saw it in the water!" said Kostya, hurt to the quick. "He almost bit off Ive's leg."

"That little thing?"

"An optical illusion. You should have seen how it went for us. A prick from its tail is fatal! You just wait, I'll send you a colour film. You'll see a whole school of pig-lizards in a forest of coral. Not that shabby specimen."

"Honestly? You give your word, Whale-milker?"

"I swear by the flippers of Matilda!"

"Katherine," Mum interrupted, "stop buzzing like a movie-camera. Let us get a word in! Ive, did you go hunting after this poisonous monster? No, don't try to wiggle out of it. The announcer said it was killed by a harpoon belonging to the Stone Age. Think what might have happened!" Mum's eyes shone with tears.

For a few moments, she lived through all possible tragic sequels of our meeting with the pig-bird-lizard. Mum's a producer of feature films, chiefly heroic epics. At the time I left, she was making a film of the first Arctic explorers, and

that's why she presented me with an electrically heated suit.

"Ive! I'll put it in the film."

"A tropical fish in a ballad of the snows?"

"Oh, not in the ballad. It's already sung. Turned out to be a very average movie."

Mother always evaluates her finished work like that, she loses all interest in it, already wrapped up in new things to be achieved.

"I'm shooting another one," she went on. "Really tremendous. About a space expedition: 'The Last Day on the *Galatea*.' What they had to live through! Three died! No, now it's four. Radon dies in the ocean from those... fish of yours...."

Mum began working out in utmost detail the scene of the death of a hero in the ocean depths on the *Galatea*.

Grandad gave a little cough and drummed his fingers nervously on the arms of his easy chair.

Kate and Kostya carried on an interesting dialogue in low voices. Not sparing detail or colouring, Kostya was describing our daily work, while Kate gasped and brimmed over with delight. My sister takes after Mum a lot. She drank in every word of Kostya's forgetting everything else in the world. Meeting my glance, she clasped her hands like a child.

"What a marvellous place you live in! I'll certainly have to fly in and get myself a friend, a sea primate. But here! If you knew how terrible things are! How many different pills we have to swallow, how many needles we get and we smear ointment on, into the bargain, to keep those rays from penetrating. Our clothes are ray-proof, too. Recently, all the roofs of buildings

and car-tops were covered with a special paint. They've changed the window-glass all over the place." Kate stopped for breath and looked at Mum who was relating the tragic finale on the *Galatea*. "We hardly ever move about," Kate continued. "I was the only lucky one: I managed to fly out to Pop. Everything's been ray-proofed there, too, but it wasn't so boring. For a whole week we lived like you do—the primitive life. Only nature and us! We slept right in a swamp in floating wigwams. The geese, ducks and swans cried night and day, all around. One swan's nest was right at our door, and he bit like anything. We counted the number of birds by Pop's method...."

Grandad coughed and raised a finger to get my attention.

"Did you look through my work?"

I'd absolutely forgotten about his pamphlet, but didn't want to hurt him.

"I haven't finished it yet."

"That's fine. It demands a thoughtful approach. Have you made a summary yet?"

"Not so far."

"You certainly must make a summary. And pay attention to the fifth chapter, the one with the diagram of... the increase in size of araucaria pollen depending upon radiation...."

Cut short while describing her new scenario, Mum looked at Grandad severely, and then at Kate who was humming a new popular song for Kostya.

"I hear some kind of strange sounds. Something's howling. Is it your pig-lizard?"

"That's me, Mum," said Kate, "singing 'The Jolly Elephant'."

"A terrible dance! Not to speak of how disgraceful it is to sing when your elders are talking. But, in this case, I"

"Honest-to-goodness, fellows, somebody's howling on your island!" cried Kate gaily.

"It's the wind!" said Kostya, triumphantly. "Take a look at this vase, the one with the orchids. See, even the water in it is rippling. You can judge how strong the wind is, if our island's rocking!"

"Oh, that's terrific!" cried Kate.

Mum was thinking, with a vague smile on her lips. Probably, she was already building up a storm scene on the *Galatea*.

Grandad used the pause to give some practical advice.

"Don't you dream of putting your nose out the door. You'll be carried away like araucaria pollen."

Mum, Kate and Grandad smiled in farewell, all speaking at once, but the sound was off and we could only see their lips moving. Then the automatic tele-exchange made excuses for atmospheric interference, and we were left alone in front of a darkened screen.

Lolling in his chair, Kostya started whistling "The Jolly Elephant", to the accompaniment of the wind outside the window.

"You know," said Kostya suddenly, "I think I'll spend the night right here on this beautiful imitation of sealskin. Apparently there are still atavistic habits rooted in us. For some reason I want to lie down right on it though it would be better if it were the real thing. But where could we get one in this humanistic age?... Don't worry, I don't need anything else. Just throw me a

couple of pillows, a blanket and two sheets from your dainty bedroom. We'll talk a while, like we used to at the university. Remember our cosy den? Go and get into bed, only don't shut the door."

He spent some time fixing his bed, tossing about and mumbling to himself. Then he was silent, but not for long.

"Are you asleep?" he asked. "Your artificial sealskin is a bit on the hard side. They say such beds are good for you. I don't know why. We'll see. It's not too bad, though... only I think your general-purpose wrench has found its way underneath and is digging into my side. And you blamed me for losing it!" The wrench slithered across the floor and hit the wall.

"It's in the west corner," Kostya added for my information. "Yes, the skin's quite bearable minus the wrench. You know what I'm thinking about now? I'm talking a lot of nonsense, but I'm thinking, actually. And you'd never guess what."

"Hard to guess. You live such a complicated emotional life," I called out.

"Don't get smart. It's no more complicated than anyone else's. I was thinking of Biata. Before going to bed, she's probably looking at Earth. And, to her, Earth would seem so shining and quiet. It would never enter her head that the wind wants to tear loose our island."

He was silent at last, probably lying open-eyed, thinking the same as I. "When, after all, is that star going to show? The Supernova that's causing such an uproar on earth and has stolen Biata from us."

THE CALL OF THE WILD

The whales had special pastures of their own, rich with their favourite food. Here, they were protected from enemies and were well cared for as regards health, and even mood. Petya Samoilov had recently mounted a transistor transmitters on twenty buoys, and the whales seemed to enjoy listening to music over ultra-short waves. At noon, they would crowd around the musical buoy as motionless as slabs of rock.

Tavi assured us that they even stopped gossiping when listening to concertos. Petya wrote an article to a radio newspaper specially broadcast for animal-breeding farms in all latitudes. He discussed the beneficial influence of music on the nervous system of his charges and stated that whales even put on weight and gave more milk as a result. Our Matilda, for instance, began to give 100 more litres of milk a day.

All the whales had been born and raised in the pastures close to the floating island. In spite of this, for no known reason, they were sometimes seized by a hankering to wander. Somewhere in the subconscious of these giants a desire lay dormant to throw up everything, and to swim and swim along the seaways travelled by their wild ancestors. At such times, we doubled the watch, sent a much higher voltage along the pasture barriers and, in rare cases, even injected antistimulators into the blood of the whales. Despite all this, almost every year a few whales (more often, the young bulls) got away. Breaking out into the open ocean, they would head south towards the Antarctic and usually they chose a dark windy night for escape. The runaways did

not often manage to get away completely. An emergency patrol of dolphins with radio transmitters would take up the chase at once and by morning, as a rule, the runaway whale was overtaken by a pursuit plane. A few darts with anti-stimulator ampoules and the runaway would stop, encircled by his smaller brothers, the dolphins. Obeying the latter's orders, the whale would lazily swim back. That is, if he wasn't intercepted by a school of killer whales before the air scout found him.

Attila, a five-year-old blue whale, escaped right after sunset; another dozen and a half young bulls raced after him, taking advantage of a breach in the force field caused by the storm. The last were stopped twenty miles from the island and returned to the pastures by a united force of dolphin patrols. Only Attila managed to get out of reach and paid no attention to the dolphins who were skilfully imitating whale signals on high frequencies. The signals meant: Stop, turn back, danger ahead. For some reason, Attila ignored the warning. Either he realized the signals were a sham, or the call to swim south was irresistible. The whole operation of returning the main mass of the runaways was carried out by the dolphins without our participation. And now, ten of them were accompanying Attila.

The whale travelled at a speed of twenty miles an hour. The self-recorder at the Central Post drew on the map a straight line that started at the island and moved towards the south magnetic pole.

"By dawn he'll be about 230 miles away,"

said Kostya. "If we leave by jet-boat in the morning, we'll catch up with him around evening. If I were on duty, I would suggest an immediate start. Then we'd be back in time for the morning milking."

Nilssen, who was on duty, had his reply to this.

"In that case, I think the Island Council would interfere and change the duty officer's instructions. There's a pretty heavy sea running, and killer whales have been observed again."

"We could take out the hydroplane," said Petya.

"In the morning. Only in the morning."

"But we have the milking."

"Don't you think you can trust someone else to do the milking for once?"

"I don't want to make others do my work. It was our fault Attila escaped: we didn't check the force field after the storm."

"The Council will decide how guilty you are. In the morning, I'll let you take out the hydroplane and experienced milkers like Chauri Singh and Lagrange will take over the milking. What a shame I can't leave my post that early. Your Matilda and I used to be great friends."

"Don't forget," Khi warned, "that Matilda gives a hundred litres more milk, and the rest of our group, too."

"Your group?"

"Well, I meant the whales...."

Everybody laughed, except Kostya. He was too busy following Attila's course.

"He's turning a bit west," said Kostya, when the laughter subsided. "Look, now he's back

on course again. Something's happening out there, and we sit amusing ourselves with chitter-chatter."

Nilssen coughed, but said nothing.

We all crowded around the map and watched the black line which lengthened almost imperceptibly. The patrols only had miniature transmitters which sent out impulses automatically; but at that moment we were picturing Attila and his guard cutting through the phosphorescent surface of the ocean.

A green signal light flashed on the control panel, followed by the impassive voice of the cyber-translator.

"Scout Kokuri observed killer whales. They are keeping the same course as we, five miles east. Kokuri managed to warn us while he was trying to draw the pursuers off on a false trail. For the first time, Attila listened to us and for two miles moved away from the killers. Then, just as before, he refused to obey. Need immediate help. This is Tavi. Over to you."

Tavi was the leader of Attila's escort, and my heart ached to think of the danger he was in this very minute.

"Tavi!" Nilssen called. "Is Black Jack with the killer whales who are near you?"

"Kokuri didn't have time to find out."

"Try to divert Attila as far west as possible."

"That's what we're doing. But he's unusually stubborn."

"Help will soon arrive on a hydroplane. Chin up, Tavi!"

Nilssen turned to us.

"Take off in two hours, so you can overtake them by dawn."

Two hours later we had just barely managed to get everything ready for take-off. It had been a long time since the islanders used this heavy old crate. Kostya and I put fuel in the tanks and began loading the gondola with weapons, boxes of ampoules, skin-diving gear, and food: all according to regulations for ocean flight. Meanwhile, Khi and Petya were using two portable searchlights to check the engine and navigation instruments.

Although it was far into the night, almost all the islanders turned out to see us off.

"Cripes! What a shame there's no room for five!" yelled Corrington, shaking hands with us. "Wait a sec!" He got us in the sights of his camera.

As we boarded the plane, Nilssen's wife, Hera, called out to her husband.

"Carl, are you sure they'll bring back that Attila?"

"Positive."

"I'm not so certain: the plane's too small. You should have summoned a dry dock from Colombo."

"Don't worry, ma'am," said the American. "These boys will tie him to the fuselage."

Pavel Mefodevich waved to us, not saying a word.

A take-off strip in the lagoon was brightly lit. Kostya and Petya took the pilot's seats.

The strip flew past us, competing in speed with the hydroplane. Dolphins tore past. They already knew where we were flying and why. Nilssen had broadcast Tavi's information to the lagoon, and our reply. So the sea primates were seeing us off and wishing us success.

From 3000 metres up, the surface of the ocean looked a murky grey. Kostya lifted the plane almost to the "ceiling", and still the ocean shimmered under us and seemed very close, flickering with starlight and the light of its countless inhabitants.

Petya and Kostya talked with Tavi and Nilsen. Tavi said that Attila had slowed down a bit but was still persistently going south. Nilsen ordered Tavi not to join battle with the killers, no matter what the circumstances. He was merely to divert them from Attila. Then he advised us to be careful as to using the antistimulators, relating that he had overdone it two years ago trying to stop a runaway and, as a result, the whale had slept for a week, rocking on the waves, while he had been forced to guard him all that time. The instructions over, Nilsen faded from the screen.

Little Khi fell asleep, curled up in his seat.

Petya said something to Kostya, and they laughed.

The stars peeped through the transparent top of the gondola. Biata's sputnik shone brightly in their midst.

"The killers have changed course," Tavi reported, "They're closing in. I've sent Krak to turn them aside."

Nilssen appeared again on hearing information that boded no good.

"Boys, try to find the killer whales before they attack Attila."

"As if that's not why we're here," said Kostya, putting the plane into such a steep dive that Khi woke up. "Are we landing already?" he asked, and went back to sleep.

"What's the idea, flying like that! Barbarous! You'll break the old *Kolymaga* to bits," protested Petya.

"Advise you to use the night binoculars for surface survey," Nilssen told us.

Kostya winked at Petya, who immediately bent over the eyepieces of the optical device.

"We haven't taken our eyes from the binoculars," Kostya told Nilssen. "So far, nothing's visible."

"Right, nothing," affirmed Petya.

"What was that term you used just now?" asked Kostya. "What the dickens is a 'Koly-maga'? Where'd you get it from?"

"I was looking through a unique encyclopaedia at the old man's. I needed information of the ancients about Kalan. And suddenly I saw a strange word. It turned out to be no other than a strange contraption on wheels, even more ancient than the automobile. They used them exclusively for travelling on hard surfaces. Without motors."

"How, without motors?" Kostya turned to Petya.

"It was drawn by animals over the ground."

"Ah, horses!"

"Not only. It seems there were other four-legged creatures they used."

"Are you watching?" said Kostya sharply.

"Of course. So far, nothing.... How many words have become archaic or received a completely different meaning. For example, we all know that a 'window-cleaner' is a very simple mechanism for cleaning transparent surfaces, but in ancient times...."

Nilssen appeared again.

"If I were in your place," he said, "I would put off for a time your undoubtedly interesting linguistic researches, as the flight target should already be beneath you, that is, if you're not off course."

Petya shook his head and whispered:

"Nothing yet. Not a sign of anything!"

"Course correct," reported Kostya, with the exaggerated restraint he feigned occasionally. "Ocean empty."

"According to my figuring," said Lagrange, "you must be just over Attila. For some reason, your automatic pilot doesn't send out impulses, and I can't see you on the map."

Petya shook his head, and Kostya answered coolly: "We have no auto-pilot. Catch us on the radar."

"What d'you mean, no auto-pilot? If I'd known, I wouldn't have let you go. In that case, you're hardly moving."

"That's true enough," agreed Kostya. "Our old coach can't squeeze out even half the designed speed. So the whole works wouldn't fall apart, the Registry put restrictors all over the engines. The "Coach" must be thirty years old, if not more."

"She's almost a brand new model. The surface areas were specially enlarged and her speed cut, otherwise you'd already be past the South Pole. Why do you call this model the 'Coach'?"

"There used to be an ancient gadget by that name, used for conveyance."

Nilssen smiled.

"Okay, boys. I get it. My job's easier than yours...."

He was interrupted by the cyber-translator bringing information from Tavi.

"A new group of killers have appeared east of us ... we...." The transmission broke off.

"It never rains but it pours," said Kostya.

"There they are!" screamed Petya.

"I knew we weren't off course," replied Kostya. "No panic, now, keep it cool...." His voice was hoarse with excitement, his face hard.

"We overshot them! Have to come round again," said Petya. "Let's dive-bomb them. It's more certain."

The plane went into a dive. A whitish strip of ocean leaped up to meet us, cut by the phosphorescent wakes of the killer whales. There were about twenty of them moving in line and headed north-east.

I didn't see the splash of the ampoules, they hit when we were way ahead zooming up out of the dive. According to Petya, the ampoules reached target.

"No time to check," said Kostya. "Watch for Attila. Why is Tavi silent? Surely he isn't mixed up in a fight!"

Nilssen's worried face appeared.

"We hit the first half," said Kostya. "Now we're looking for the second gang of pirates. Not a sound from Tavi. Hope he isn't in a fight."

"He mustn't take risks," said Nilssen. "He has nothing to fight with. He needs only to lure the grampuses away from Attila till you get there. Well, I won't bother you. The *Kallmar's*, on her way. She should be getting pretty close to you...."

"What would we do without that piece of

information?" grinned Kostya. "Go back, I suppose, and give the whole thing up."

"Nilssen's in a dither. Put yourself in his shoes," whispered Petya. "He is responsible for Attila, for us, and the dolphins. On top of that, his own hands are tied. A rotten spot to be in."

"Everybody's in a bad spot, and we're the only ones having a good time!"

We circled in a slow spiral at 700 metres, gradually moving north-east.

The short tropic dawn flared up as bright and colourful as fireworks.

Khi woke up and stared around.

"You know, fellows, right now the ocean looks awfully like a gigantic soap bubble," he said meaningly.

"A shattering discovery!" Kostya turned to look at him. "Perhaps you can tell us where Attila is stuck on this gigantic soap bubble?"

"Doesn't the radar work?" asked Khi.

"We haven't got any radar, and Tavi's stopped sending signals."

"It's as clear as day," cried Khi, happily, wrinkling his sleepy face in a smile. "The micro-radio transmitter can only work on the surface. Tavi's either dead, or he's lost the transmitter, or else he's fighting with killer whales in the depths. Could be, as well, that we've landed in a zone of silence."

"Now it certainly is as clear as day," replied Kostya. "What a load off my shoulders. What a dire spot we were with no information while you slept on that uncomfortable seat."

"If I'd known you needed my advice...."

That moment some green sparks flared on the screen and died out: it received all signals.

"You're right," Kostya sighed. "The tramp's got into a fight."

Nilssen's voice came over the loudspeaker. He was wise enough not to show on the video, and only remarked that we were out by twenty miles north-east, and gave the correct course.

"What a lot of useful advice they're giving us today!" growled Kostya, banking the *Kolymaga*.

Now the sun rose behind our backs. And at once we saw the whale, ten miles ahead. It looked as if Attila was calmly swimming to his desired Antarctic. But, the nearer we got, the plainer it was that the poor fellow had got into trouble.

Killer whales and sharks were tearing the helpless whale to pieces. He tried to dive, but couldn't. Surfacing, he threw up a fountain of blood, and streams of blood poured from his terrible wounds.

Flying over, Kostya managed to drop a series of ampoules. When we came round and were over target, Attila was lashing his tail in agony on the blood-stained water.

Kostya dropped the remaining ampoules and set down the *Kolymaga*. Raising the transparent top of the gondola, we circled the dying whale. Near him, many sharks and about thirty grampuses were rocking on the surface. Petya noticed a few dolphins among them. And I recognized Tavi.

Petya and Khi threw overboard the inflatable boat; on touching water it automatically filled with air. Khi and I dropped into it, and towed the brave dolphins far enough away from Attila to be out of the doped water zone.

Tavi had a light wound. A shark or a grampus had torn a strip of skin off his back, as well as the 2-way radio. Two of his friends had suffered more severe wounds. All the dolphins were in a heavy, narcotic trance and barely kept on the surface. I injected Tavi with an antidote.

When consciousness returned, Tavi began telling an incoherent story about what had happened. He often had to interrupt his tale, as many sharks had appeared. News of the dying whale had spread over a wide territory: more and more predators raced to the scene of the tragedy. When they hit the poisoned zone, they became harmless, but on the way to the wounded giant they could give a lot of trouble. Our guns got no rest. And the dolphins ached to be in action, but were still so weak that Khi asked them to keep as close to the boat as possible.

Going by the broken account of Tavi and his friends, it was clear that there had been an organized hunt after the whale. A few groups of killer whales had moved in on Attila from all sides, but at a distance, gradually tightening the ring. Tavi figured they were from Black Jack's gang. His pirates alone operated with such coordination and in such numbers (usually a school of killer whales does not exceed twenty), but none of the dolphins could definitely say he had seen Black Jack.

Tavi went only half way in carrying out Nilsen's order. He had not got in the fight himself, but he couldn't leave the defenceless Attila. While the dolphins were diverting a dozen grampuses from the whale, about a hundred killers attacked him. Then the sharks appeared. At this, Tavi, and the rest of his friends who were still

alive in the detachment, hurled themselves into a bloody struggle and began ramming the killer whales and sharks. In the heat of the battle, Tavi lost the 2-way radio but didn't notice it, and kept sending messages all the time. At any rate, he was sure he was keeping us informed.

Meanwhile, from the nearest reef came a large number of seagulls. They circled over Attila's body in a white, screaming cloud.

The *Kallmar* arrived. A few whaleboats were lowered and their crews began sorting out the grampuses from the sharks. They gave the former a second dose of narcotics each, to guarantee a 48-hour sleep. Then they hoisted them with the winch into an inflated plastic barge which the *Kallmar* had thrown overboard in the form of a large sack and which inflated upon touching water. One-third full of water, the barge rocked heavily alongside the patrol ship.

Kostya and Petya had left the *Kolymaga* and got in one of the whaleboats.

Meanwhile, the *Kallmar* was getting ready to sail away. Three whaleboats had already been taken aboard, and the fourth was approaching the hydroplane with Petya, Kostya and another person whom I couldn't make out. All three started to wave and yell to Khi and me. We were about 200 metres from the *Kolymaga* and the birds screamed so loudly they drowned out all other sounds. We'd forgotten to bring a pocket telephone with us.

So many gulls had settled on Attila, his body was white with them. He still showed signs of life: dead, he would have gone to the bottom long ago.

When the fourth whaleboat was lifted aboard,

four shots rang out, one after another, from the foredeck. A dark swarm of feathered predators rose into the glowing, cloudless sky and at once swooped down. But to their surprise and chagrin, the body of the whale was slowly disappearing below the surface.

Many sleeping sharks floated on the blue water, but they weren't yet food for the gulls. The birds settled on them and also sank into drowsy waiting. The wind fell off. A light swell ran from the south, and our boat scarcely moved over the buoyant waters.

"My ancestors believed in reincarnation," remarked Khi. "Thousands of years ago, observing and speculating over life and death, they discovered the law of the rotation of matter, and presented it in poetical form. For them, death became a thing of joy, the beginning of new life. For ancient peoples, with their hard life, poetry occupied a very important place, more than it does for us who enjoy unlimited possibilities of self-expression." Khi stopped rowing, listened, and added with a smile: "They have a guest. You hear how sweetly she laughs? Probably it's your Girl from the Star, the one Kostya talks about so much."

And I heard a familiar laugh penetrating through the cries of the gulls. I could hardly get my breath: was it really Biata? But, of course, it was!

Kostya's grinning face was thrust out of the gondola.

"Sorry for not coming to meet you. Didn't want to break into your idyll with the roar of the engines. Let me help you roll up the boat." Then he noticed Tavi. "Again, Jack got away!

And, d'you see, he WAS here. Your friends from the *Kallmar* said they noticed him making off with a dozen of the pirates. Listen, Tavi, what if he swallowed your micro-transmitter and it goes on working in his stomach? That would be something! He couldn't hide any more. What a success this mission would have been! If only we hadn't lost Attila.... Now then," to me, "give me your boat. And you, Tavi, head for the island with the others. And mind you don't get involved in a fight with sharks—leave them alone and they won't touch you. Happy journey!"

"And a good flight to you and everybody," answered Tavi.

It was Vera sitting in the second pilot's seat. She nodded at me as if we'd seen each other only yesterday. In one hand, she held a sandwich; in the other, a glass of pineapple juice.

I was terribly thirsty. Vera poured me some iced juice from a thermos.

"I want to learn to milk whales," she said, passing me the glass.

"We thought you were from the Star, at first," interrupted Khi.

"Oh, I'm the most earthly of earthwomen. Space brings out the blues in me."

"He got you mixed with Biata," Kostya mumbled, with his mouth full.

"Not me! I'd never part with Earth. Besides, whatever would I do there in space?"

"Why, all kinds of things," said Kostya. "You could grow your green stuff there, too. Seaweeds."

"We've sent them seaweeds from Earth. A special cosmic species. But live there? Goodness

no! I simply couldn't. Forever dangling in that nitwit structure between heaven and earth."

"Did you really discover a walking mimosa?" asked Petya.

"Not another word! No more about THAT, if you don't mind," replied Vera, wincing. "Forget it!"

"What are you playing modest for?" asked Kostya. "Plays a real part, she does, in a sensational discovery and then dodges the laurels. You'd do better to tell us how your 'saurians' are."

"I'm not being modest at all. I boasted about them everywhere, at first," said Vera sadly, tightening her lips. "My 'saurians' are dead, like your Attila. They also wanted to see the world, their microcosmos, and died. All because they walked too soon. Children mustn't walk too soon. I'm sorry for them. Sorrier than you are for that unlucky whale, I guess. Mokimoto tried to cheer me up. 'Look on failure the same as on success,' he told me. I try, but I don't get anywhere."

"Mokimoto's right," said Kostya, handing back his empty glass. "If these didn't work out, others will. After all, you've got thousands of other plants. And everything's going the way it should. Give me some more juice, d'you mind?"

Nilssen came through on the screen, as shining and rosy-cheeked as ever.

"Oh, so you have a guest!" He bowed to Vera. "Now I'm beginning to believe in miracles."

"It's all so simple," came Vera's melancholy reply.

THE OLD PHOTOGRAPH

"You've never been to my bear's den yet," said Pavel Mefodevich, one evening. "Do come! It's still early, and we'll have tea with raspberry jam. Wild raspberries! Have you any idea what they are? They grow wild along the edge of a great pine forest, in earth and not in containers of chemically-treated solution. I have an old friend, a forest ranger, by the name of Yuri Andreyevich Shadrin. An interesting personality. A hot defender of all living things. He found an unusually clever race of ants. You notice how I put it? Found, or if you prefer, discovered. There are still things on earth waiting to be discovered."

We were walking along the main alley past the wind turbines that droned as they swung in the black sky.

"In school, we also experimented on ants," said Kostya. "Remember, I've?"

"We tried to increase their size," I answered.

"Along with their brains, I suppose. And, consequently, to increase their mental faculties?" sparkled Pavel Mefodevich.

"Yes, that's what we wanted to do."

"Well, so how did it turn out?"

"We ended up with some kind of freaks."

"Brilliant ones, I hope?"

"Could be, though they didn't show any signs of it."

"And did other great aims deter you from continuing the experiments?"

"You guessed it. We started designing an antigravitation engine."

"Also a meritable target. But don't feel so

bad. Others are following in your footsteps. The youngsters at School No. 8 in the town of Clear Waters, where the Shilka River runs into the Argun! Well then, recently the late newscast on TV demonstrated the achievements of these young naturalists. According to one of them, a smart black-eyed young fellow he was, they managed to grow a new type of praying mantis—fifty centimetres tall. You should have seen the frightful thing! But that wasn't good enough for them. After the boy finished, a geneticist, the leader of this disgraceful experiment spoke. Though a respectable middle-aged gentleman he, if you please, promised that his young naturalists would attempt to develop the offspring of this praying mantis into creatures a whole metre in height. Why, such a thing could bite your leg clean off! The only comfort is that such monsters are usually not hardy, and soon die. But just suppose they did prove hardy? I wasted no time in calling the Control Committee of Scientific Experiments. They put my fears at rest, saying there's a law that limits the field of action of 'wild' experimenters. I wonder what the limitations are—imagine a praying mantis as big as a sheep-dog! Here we are, do come in."

Pavel Mefodevich lived and worked in a house very like an out-of-town summer cottage. It was surrounded by plane trees.

We entered a large hall. The walls were of heavy pine logs, the floor of polished boards. On the wall facing the entrance hung an oil painting of an old-time settlement: squat, thatch-roofed huts with a Byzantine church in their midst, birch-trees with rooks' nests and a flock of birds wheeling above in the blue sky. I had

never seen such settlements for they had long disappeared leaving only a few churches surrounded by quite different buildings, or else found simply in open fields or parks. The sight of our forefathers' dwellings, beautiful even in their squalor, somehow or other riveted us to the picture. Kostya and I stared long at the canvas while Pavel Mefodevich stood close by, aloof but smiling at us.

"The hut on the far left belonged to my great-grandfather, and it was my grandfather who painted the picture. Do you like it?"

"Very much," answered Kostya.

"Of course! Old Rus! Very inspiring!"

He invited us into his study, which was more like the exhibiting hall of a camera artist: it was large in size and the walls were covered with photographs, mostly sunsets at sea or on land taken in different parts of the world.

"I'll go and brew the tea," he said. "So far, my robot Miss Charming hasn't learned to make it properly. She times the whole process second after second and keeps the right temperature to within one hundredth of a degree, and still doesn't get it right. She's deficient in the creative line, and without that it's impossible to make real tea. Amuse yourselves with the pictures while I'm gone. I think you'll find a few shots of interest."

"A few. That's putting it mildly!" exclaimed Kostya, after Pavel Mefodevich had gone and we were alone. "There must be thousands here, and some are really quite lovely. Take that one over there!" Kostya's eyes had fallen on a landscape taken in the central region of the European part of Russia. There were a rolling plain,

fields, a gloomy, dreamy pine forest and a gay laughing birch grove all lit by the rays of a setting sun.

Then I was attracted by a few photographs that looked very old: they hung on the wall over the work table.

"Look!" I called to Kostya. "These must be his relatives and friends. And you still think he's a cyborg!"

"But a cyborg could also have relatives and friends from the human branch of the family. After all, it's a hybrid of man and machine. Though..." Kostya broke off, staring hard at the faded photograph taken at a spaceport.

A group of astronauts were staring fixedly at the camera. Their youthful faces were stiff with tacked-on smiles, an attempt to hide their apprehension of the unknown....

Miss Charming soundlessly entered the room, holding a tray loaded with tea things and glass bowls of cookies, sweets and fruit. Close behind her came Pavel Mefodevich, muttering something to himself, and carrying a large china teapot decorated with embossed dragons.

"I don't trust this to that happy-go-lucky mechanical girl," he said, placing the exotic teapot carefully on a round table by the window. "When we first met and I read her Certificate, I was so overwhelmed by her unbelievable merits that I trusted her with it, and almost lost one of my dearest possessions. Can you imagine, she put it right on the stove without a drop of water in it, and then tried to put the blame on me. I hadn't told her, d'you see, that it should be filled with water first."

Miss Charming was adept at serving, and list-

ened to the remarks made about her without the slightest show of embarrassment. Something like a smile rippled across her round, vibroplastic face which reflected a certain archness.

The velvety rustling of the plane trees outside the window muffled all other sounds.

We praised the stringent, almost bitter tea with its very unusual aroma.

Pavel Mefodevich accepted our praise as his due.

"What d'you expect, it's my own recipe. Even I like it. And this time it turned out rather well. Would you like me to tell you the secret?..." He looked at the robot. "Charming! You may retire to your room."

"I don't want to," answered Charming. Her voice rang with a deep timbre that was rather pleasant.

"What? What d'you mean—you don't want to?"

"If I leave, I won't hear a piece of interesting information."

"But afterwards, you'll start spreading it through all channels."

"That's what information's for," observed Charming, reasonably.

"Well, all right... then bring... mm.... My dear boys, what would you like?" he asked, tipping us off with a wink to join him in the conspiracy.

"A bottle of mineral water," said Kostya.

"Just the thing, mineral water. Did you hear, Charming?"

"Yes, I did. And when I've gone for the mineral water, you'll tell them your secret of making tea."

"Most likely I will. Though there's not much secret about it."

"You're not being logical. Eighty seconds ago, you promised to tell a secret."

"If you don't do what you're told, I'll have to send you off for repairs."

Charming excused herself, and left the room.

"There, how do you like my servant? I often catch myself thinking that I'm dealing with a creature of real intellect."

"We'll have to introduce her to our Penelope," suggested Kostya.

"We're already acquainted," came a deep voice from the kitchen.

"I quite forgot she has perfect hearing," whispered Pavel Mefodevich.

"Everything I have is perfect," announced Charming, appearing with glasses and a bottle of mineral water beaded with moisture.

Opening the bottle, she filled the glasses and retired to her usual place.

"I suppose we'll have to put up with the society of this dear lady. Just as we put up with all this modern technology that weighs us down. Miss Charming is the very quintessence of engineering. An engineering that lives up to the saying: 'Know thyself.' A technical humanoid."

"I like that expression: 'Miss Charming is the very quintessence of engineering.' But 'technical humanoid' is as unintelligible as all the words classed as 'swearing'...."

Charming really amused us. This type of robot possessed a very capacious memory, an amazingly logical intellect. Our teacher was the only one on the island to have such a superior robot.

Pavel Mefodevich noticed that Kostya and I

kept glancing occasionally at the photo of the astronauts.

"I'd never have thought that old photograph would attract you, not among such a dazzling display of sunsets. Though, you may be right. There's something about it that grips you. Possibly the spaceships in the background. Once, they were the peak of engineering design, the last word in science. And now? The crudeness of form is simply staggering."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that!" protested Kostya. "Even today, such spacecraft arouses respect."

"You think so?"

"They're very imposing ships. But I'm more interested in the people."

"Why?" asked Pavel Mefodevich sharply.

"There's something sort of special about their faces."

"Yes, that's so.... Something special. That sums it up. And they were special, quite unusual.... Drink your tea, and please help yourselves.... Some time, I'll tell you about those people. Another time. About them, and about our flight. About a terrifying trip into outer space.... Many thought we were imprudent, ill-advised...."

"Be careful and self-controlled," uttered Charming solemnly. "A cool head is just as necessary as a hot heart."

Pavel Mefodevich smiled.

"Every evening before bed-time, she comes out with her inexhaustible supply of cheerful aphorisms."

Charming looked at her master, expectantly.

"We should make the most of our lot without resorting to comparisons; he will never be happy

who is tormented by the vision of great happiness. When you start worrying about how many people are ahead of you, think how many are behind you."

"Do you hear that? What a monkey she is! Honestly, her citation from Seneca was rather to the point, wasn't it? When I start scolding her, she gives me a spiteful dig about my not being so young any more."

"Watch out that old age doesn't put more wrinkles on your soul than on your face," Charming blurted out.

"Well, what do you say now?"

We began praising the remarkable creature. Charming listened attentively to our compliments, went into the next room and quickly returned with a small japanned tray on which reposed a glass of water and a green pill. Pavel Mefodevich swallowed it, thanked her, and began showing us his phono-collection: thousands of magnetic tapes, reels and platters on which he had recorded the voices of sea primates. Then he read us an excerpt from his new book on the history of contacts between dolphins and man. He was very lively, but this vivaciousness was threaded through with nervous excitement. Twice more that evening, Charming made him take a pill and drops of some kind.

"In this, nobody could replace her," said Pavel Mefodevich, draining his glass. "Any doctor, no matter how exacting in the matter of treatment, could completely depend on her iron will."

"What is iron will?" asked Charming.

"I'll tell you later. Young people aren't interested in hearing such banalities."

"Very good. Before bed-time, you will also explain the meaning of banality."

Pavel Mefodevich only shrugged.

"It's certainly time you knew, the more so because you're forever uttering banalities."

"Very well. I shall thoroughly analyse my speech."

"Be kind enough to do that!"

"In ten minutes it's your bed-time."

"With every minute, things get worse instead of better."

"No, they don't. You'll feel better when you get into bed. And as always, you'll say: 'Of all things on earth, time belongs to us the least; and we never have enough of it'."

"Now, honestly, what can I do with her?" said Pavel Mefodevich, raising his hands in dismay.

"I haven't the slightest doubt, now," said Kostya, after we left the house.

"And did you before?" I asked.

"How can I put it? Occasionally, I had the odd doubt. It was hard to believe that a living being with such an intellect could actually be... a cyborg."

"And what strong proof have you got now?"

"What proof? I've finally made sure that he's stuffed with electronic units."

"A tapping sound?"

"Not exactly, more like the ticking of an old clock with a pendulum. Doubtless, he's one of the very first cyborgs, with certain technical faults, though he is brilliant, kind and also immortal. You see, he can live as long as he

wants. If some detail or bio-ganglion gives out, a little repair—and away it ticks again.”

“But the pills? Drops? Regime?” I asked, suddenly struck by the simple idea that a machine doesn’t need any medicine.

Kostya squashed my doubts.

“A biorobot’s organism is just as complicated as man’s. He also occasionally needs stimulators and a regime. Perhaps, at ten o’clock his batteries have to be changed, or plugged in for a recharge....”

The sand crunched behind us.

“It’s Charming!” cried Kostya.

We stopped. It really was Charming, hurrying to catch up with us.

“I gave him a sleeping powder. He’s asleep. He was very excited. He always is when somebody draws his attention to that old photograph on the wall.”

Charming fell silent, waiting for us to speak.

Kostya threw me an eloquent look.

“We’re very sorry we got him excited. We’ll try not to, next time.”

“You mustn’t come any more.”

“Is that what he asked you to tell us?”

“No. But I must keep him from getting upset. You mustn’t meet any more. Otherwise, I’ll be sent away for repairs.”

“Are you scared of that?”

“Very much.”

“But look, they won’t hurt you. Only make you better.”

“I’m afraid. I don’t want to be better than I am. Don’t meet him any more.”

“We can’t promise you that, because we have to see him every day. Go back to him, now.”

"Why?"

"To watch over... care for him...."

"He'll sleep till half past five."

"And when he wakes up?"

"Ten minutes for morning drill, fifteen for breakfast. The rest of the time he meets the sunrise. As he puts it: 'I'll go and meet the sun; and you, Miss Charming, carry on with your work.'"

"So run along and follow the wise advice of your master."

"Yes, I shall follow the wise advice of my master. At twenty past ten, I have a Japanese lesson."

"You're learning Japanese? Why?"

"He told me to, so he could write letters to Mokimoto in his own language."

"Okay, and after the lesson? What do you do, then?"

"I watch the TV programme for robots. It's interesting, even though I'm not a robot, and that's why I'm so afraid of repairs. Once, I saw how they do it. It scared me to death."

"Don't worry, you don't need any repairs.... I've never seen such a clever rob... clever creature." Kostya corrected himself in time.

"Creature—that sounds nice. Always call me that."

"All right, Charming."

"Charming—that's nice, too."

"Well, good-bye. Come and chat with us some time."

"I'm off from three to five."

"In the morning?"

"Yes, in the morning, before the sun rises."

"Good heavens, no! Come in the daytime, when we're at dinner."

"I shall figure out the probable chances of visiting you at dinner time over the next ten years."

"An excellent idea!"

Charming bade us good night, and went away, waddling like a duck.

Kostya stood staring after her.

"You know, all this makes my head swim. As a matter of fact, she is a creature, and one that reasons. She has very high emotionality. How could they ever build such machines..."

"... which do exercises, have breakfast, meet the sun, study primates of the sea and write scientific books about them?" I finished Kostya's sentence.

"So what'd I tell you!" Kostya took my arm. "You see, I've, how it all fits. And even though I was the first to guess, I had my doubts all the same."

"And now?"

"As clear as day, I've. And you know, I'm sorry for him. We should do something so he won't feel so lonely. A fine pair we are! In all this time, we've looked in on the old man only this once, and then we got him excited."

THE CHASE

Our *Mustang* with a happy purr was bouncing from wave to wave. Today, the water looked as heavy as mercury and was the same silvery grey as the clouded-over sky.

"Fragments of the cyclone," said Kostya re-

gretfully, eyeing the sky. "There was a darn good cyclone coming our way, but it was gunned down near Sumatra. The most we can count on now is a stiff breeze."

I listened quietly, admiring the pastel tones of the sea and sky. Personally, I was pretty fed up with windy weather.

We left behind the gay-coloured buoy that marked the east corner of the "enclosure" for whale sharks. We were accompanied for about five kilometres by a happy crowd of Proteus and Tavi's friends who were guarding the farm and plantation borders. Then they turned back. Kostya switched on the jet-boat's automatic pilot: we had to cut straight across 100 kilometres of unexplored sea, take water samples, and work out a table of plankton density in this aquatoria. Kostya took over the hardest part of the work, that is, from his point of view. He relaxed in the cool skipper's chair, fiddling with some wire gadget and, glancing at the log, ordered me about. I hung over the side, trying to scoop water into a long, narrow 500-cubic-centimetre glass. It wasn't so easy to reach down and collect water while travelling at such a fast clip. I had already lost one glass, and there was no guarantee that the rest of the lab utensils wouldn't suffer the same fate. Kostya pretended not to notice my tormenting contortions, but I guess his conscience bothered him for he kept trying to amuse me with the local news. Kostya has an exceptional trait: he never misses a thing. He always knows what's going on at the island and in the lagoon where, through Proteus, he was widely acquainted with the dolphins.

Tilting his white wide-brimmed hat on the

back of his head, Kostya burst suddenly into laughter.

"While we were splashing around in the lagoon, Nilssen's wife, Hera, left in a hydroplane that was going her way. The yellow crabs made a big impression on her. Yesterday, a few specimens paid her a night visit. Some of the crabs have settled down on the island, dug holes or picked out cracks in the basalt, and after sundown they go wandering around. 'I admire your heroism,' she told me on leaving, 'but I can't bear it any more. They started dropping from the ceiling when I was still in bed.' By the way, to-day they're going to implant new transducers into Big Jaques' head. Can there really be something like intelligence in his dome? Well, I'm all for it. Jaques is considered to be one of the most highly developed species in the cephalopod genealogical tree. And if he has such a high-powered apparatus that acts on the minds of those around him, then why shouldn't he have some kind of intellect? And you know who else I'm interested in, on our island? The genetic boys. I think they've found the reason behind mutation. It's possible that the Star has nothing to do with it."

"I've lost another glass," I interrupted him.

Then Kostya said he could no longer be indifferent to the destruction of all the lab equipment and, with a long-suffering grimace, he left his chair. The wire gadget he had been amusing himself with all this time turned out to be a special holder for the glass tubes. Using this, Kostya had no need of hanging overboard—oh no! He scooped up the water with ease and passed me the glass for analysis. Previously, I had done

all this work alone. But it was no use arguing with Kostya where the division of work was concerned.

"You ungrateful wretch!" he answered, when I made a weak attempt to restore justice and take a rest myself. "You forget all the free news you got, and the amount of intellect I put into it!"

I sat blissfully happy in the chair, now. The work wasn't hard, and I enjoyed it. Not just the work itself, but everything taken together: the playful wrangling with Kostya, the sunny day, the salt spray flying over the boat, the gentle touch of the cool trade-wind, but mainly the feeling of endless space and the freedom you never get enough of living in town.

Tavi and Proteus were chasing flying fish. It takes super-dexterity, strength and speed to catch fish on the fly. A fish flies out of the water at terrific acceleration and must be caught just as it hits the surface. If you are too slow by a fraction of a second, the fish is beyond reach. Naturally, it isn't much trouble for a dolphin to catch a fish at the moment of splash-down. But no real athlete would do it. Tavi and Proteus took turns in trying to catch a fish. One chased it from the water while the other, receiving a signal from the "game-beater", tore along the surface. He wasn't always lucky, for the fish flew either to the right or left of the hunter and sometimes a few metres ahead of him. Absorbed in the contest, the dolphins swung far off our course, and finally disappeared completely in the glittering blue distance.

Half an hour passed and the dolphins still hadn't returned. I throttled down the motors.

Kostya suggested I go up in the crow's nest to scan the horizon. I didn't argue. Not afraid of heights, I'm always ready to sway in the basket of fine netting mounted on top of the 20-metre collapsible mast. I saw the dolphins at once, ten miles away. They were moving towards us at top speed. I was on the point of telling Kostya to bring me down when, by chance, my gaze swung away from the dolphins and I noticed tell-tale splashes. Moving with even greater speed to cut off Proteus and Tavi, came a school of killer whales. A second group was rushing to intercept them from the other side, and a few more were pressing hard behind.

Hearing about the grampuses, Kostya got the picture in a flash. In a matter of minutes, the mast was 'felled', and we were scudding to the rescue. The jet-boat roared, skipping from wave to wave. Kostya was at the wheel, his head hunched down between his shoulders as if he were crouched for a jump. I stared ahead through the wind screen but, to tell the truth, I'd no idea what we could do against such a number of killer whales. Kostya's voice reached me through the roar and clamour, the splash of water.

"The gun! Get it! Donkey, in the left locker."

I wasn't mad at him over the "donkey" and hurriedly pulled out the carbine which fired shock grenades. Too bad there was no ampoule-gun on board, or more serious weapons!

Kostya was driving the jet-boat at the largest grampus detachment. They were still about a mile away, but I lost patience and shot.

"That's it!" Kostya nodded. "Give them another. Let them know we're not joking."

Certainly, we must have confused them, giving

the killers a warning to expect trouble. I thought how nice it would be if they were "cultured" bandits, that is, already acquainted with firearms, and not "wild" ones that would scarcely catch the meaning of the noise I raised.

"Shoot!" howled Kostya.

We were 200 metres from the nearest grampuses.

"Again!"

I pulled the trigger. The sound-grenades burst in the water and in the air, a bit to one side of the killers. Even so, they all turned and hid underwater, going away from the *Mustang*.

Kostya screamed a warning. I didn't hear what he said, but got the idea when I painfully hit the side of the boat, thrown off balance as the jet-boat swung sharply round. Kostya headed for the other grampus detachment, but slowed down to let Tavi and Proteus come alongside under the protection of my "artillery".

The second detachment also avoided us, diving underwater.

Kostya switched on the hydrophone and asked the dolphins whether Black Jack was among the pirates. The answer came back that he was in the rearguard group, the third, and they could hear their signals a mile away.

"Their voices sound threatening. We don't know their language. But it's clear they're planning something. We should attack first. Give us the killing-fire!"

The dolphins were spoiling for a fight, and asked for electric harpoons. From carelessness, we hadn't packed these much needed weapons. When they knew we had nothing to fight the

grampuses with, the dolphins suggested we start for the island at once.

"Take to our heels!" cried Kostya, outraged. "I'd be ashamed to face our *Mustang*! Never, no matter what happens! They won't dare attack us. But keep close to the boat and don't do anything rash."

"They will attack!"

"Well, we'll see about that. Honestly, I was sorry for Black Jack when he was being hunted down, but now... if he dares...."

Lagrange appeared on the videophone. He was on duty today at the island. On hearing Kostya's news, the Frenchman rubbed his hands gleefully.

"Are you kids lucky to meet Jack in person!" he exclaimed, gesturing wildly. "The first time in two weeks. Too bad you haven't an ampoule-gun, or ampoules, at least. Maybe you'd be luckier than the fellows on the *Kallmar*. Hold out, and I'll send along a squadron of jet-boats. We'll get that rascal Jack this time. I advise you not to go too close, and don't let him know what you're up to. In your place, I'd keep on taking water samples. That should keep him guessing. Besides the jet-boats, I'll send up the *Kolymaga* stacked with dope." Lagrange waved and blacked out.

We were fifty miles from the floating island. It would take the jets an hour and a half to reach us, counting loading time, of course, and if we didn't move from the spot. Our main hope was the *Kolymaga*. But suddenly the weather turned bad, the wind freshened and more clouds rolled up. The killer whales vanished or, rather, it was hard to make them out at such a distance among the flying white caps.

The barometer had been falling since morning, and we were expecting a pretty stiff wind and a rough sea by evening. But nobody had paid much attention to the forecast. We always had some wind, and the waves never stopped rolling. The *Mustang* was designed to cope with the strongest hurricane, and in case of need it could be turned into a U-boat and ride out the storm at fifteen or twenty metres below.

Bringing the jet up into the wind, we almost held her stationary. From time to time, our scouts reported the enemy's location. Following our talk with Lagrange, the grampuses maintained their former distance for several minutes, and then began going away. We increased our speed accordingly. The enemy intended using their favourite tactics, at least it seemed that way to us at first. Jack, we thought, had scattered his troops.

"Now they'll go in different directions, and make fools of us again. If only we could figure out Jack's course!" Kostya spoke into the hydrophone: "Tag the Big Killer! We'll take up the chase and capture him as soon as the jet-boats and flying boat arrive. But don't go farther than twenty metres from the boat!"

"We know," answered one of the dolphins. "They're turning back!"

"Back where?"

"Our way."

"What nonsense!"

"We can't figure it."

"They simply wouldn't dare to attack the *Mustang*!"

"They're attacking! They're singing the Song of Death."

"Who for?"

"For me, Proteus, you and Ive."

"We'll see about that!" cried Kostya.

The wind howled in our ears and a wave almost swallowed the *Mustang*. Kostya swung the ship sharply to cut the wave and pushed the throttle up to full speed. Only when I thought to push the button marked: "Fully hermetic" and we were enclosed in the transparent cabin, did Kostya look at me.

"It never rains but it pours!" Kostya announced happily. "Did you hear? Jack's singing the Song of Death. I've never heard of such a thing. But I've turned on the recorder. This will be a surprise for our old man."

Clouds blotted out the sky.

Lagrange advised that the jet-boats had left and the *Kolymaga* was ready for take-off; it would be airborne in a few minutes. Petya Samoilov and his friend Khi were flying it.

"If I were you, I wouldn't use the *Kolymaga* today," Kostya told him. "If the wind brings her down on the water, she won't take off again."

"Perhaps I'd say the same in your place," laughed Lagrange and, glancing aside, added: "They have just taken off."

Listening to the dialogue between Lagrange and Kostya, I stopped watching the sea for about a minute. And when I threw a glance at the white billows, I saw the enormous body of a killer whale slipping through the foam about a hundred yards away. Its dark-coloured skin, almost black, at once hit the eye.

"It's Jack!" I thought, against my will admiring the near relative of our dolphins.

"The killer! The killer's near! On the left!"

came through the hydrophone. "Others are on the right, too. They're everywhere!"

The voice of the mechanical interpreter sounded even and calm, with no intonations of alarm, and yet it was the death cry of our friends. With difficulty, I opened the small porthole and shot a grenade. Through the roar of the hurricane came a weak, hardly audible crack. I saw Tavi hugging close to the boat, in blind fear.

Black Jack—it was really him—passed by us, very close. I even imagined he was grinning, viciously.

The *Mustang* tore along at the highest speed possible in such high waves. Kostya often had to throttle down the motors, especially when we flew up to the crest of a wave. On reaching the top, the jet-boat took off and flew about ten metres through the air, raising a fountain of spray as she hit the water. The nose went down so deep that water washed over the cabin. What luck that we had a jet-boat with a hermetically sealed cover!

Tavi and Proteus kept close alongside, one on each side. After a twenty-minute run, they started to fall behind as the waves grew bigger and they had to swim a longer distance underwater breaking through the waves, just as we did.

Killer whales flashed by on all sides in the raging sea. Coming nearer, growing more daring, they were surrounding our jet-boat. The dolphins fell silent, getting ready for their last fight. But, perhaps, they still put their hopes on our power, which they thought boundless.

A jet of water spurted through the porthole, rebounding and soaking us from head to foot.

Kostya only shook his head, and said something in answer to Petya Samoilov flying the *Koly-maga*, and to the islanders racing to our aid in jet-boats. Then a wave swept right over us. In the dim green light that filtered through the roof of our cabin, I saw the silhouettes of the dolphins and the long shadow of a killer whale sliding above them. It was hard to say why the killer whales were slow to attack. Maybe Black Jack figured the dolphins couldn't escape anyway, and was playing cat and mouse with them. Or else he wanted to find out just how dangerous we were, whether we had a surprise up our sleeves in the line of weapons. Jack's old war with human beings had taught him to be careful. Whatever it was, the enemy's delay saved Tavi and Proteus.

"What idiots!" said Kostya as he turned a switch on the console and spoke over the hydrophone. "Get into the stern ambulance compartment, through the side. Hurry!"

"Who are you calling idiots? And what compartment do you mean?" I asked.

"We're both idiots! Imagine forgetting that this is an ambulance outfit with a cabin for transporting sick dolphins. They're already inside! Great!" And Kostya turned back the switch and cast a swift look at the radar screen.

A fiery green dot was moving straight towards us. Kostya swung the jet a fraction off course. Now the dot rushed towards the jet-boat at an angle: one of the killer whales was going to ram us. Any moment now it would crash into the side of the boat and break the sheathing. I stared at the green dot as if hypnotized. Kostya turned the helm and drove straight at the attacking

K-whale. I shut my eyes, gripping the hand-rails, and waited for the rending jolt. But the jet-boat only shuddered under the blow as the grampus lightly grazed the boat to starboard. At the last moment, Kostya had avoided a direct ram.

Attack after attack was made. Black Jack finally realized that the *Mustang* couldn't defend herself, and kept sending in suicide-killers to ram us.

Our friends racing to the rescue kept sending message of encouragement, but they were still far away. All our hopes now were pinned on Petya and Khi in the *Kolymaga*. They had already made a few passes somewhere above and, as Petya cheerfully put it, had dumped two containers of dope ampoules "right on our heads." But they missed, which wasn't surprising in such a wind and considering the high altitude the *Kolymaga* was cruising at: they couldn't drop lower without risking a crash landing in the raging ocean. I asked Kostya whether we shouldn't try to break through the encirclement in the direction of our rescuers. But he shook his head.

"We'd only lose speed on the turn, and then...."

Certainly, speed was now only hope. If the killer whales couldn't overrun us, they wouldn't be able to ram the boat. Time after time, the jet-boat shuddered as the killers, calling on every ounce of strength, nosed hard into the stern. But they lacked the power to ram us broadside.

"They're getting out of breath," said Kostya, not taking his eyes off the water-swept wind screen. The waves had turned into giant rollers.

Now the *Mustang* made longer jumps off each foamy peak. Our heads ached from the heavy blows, our seats dipped smoothly down while the sonar screen I was watching shot upward. I was afraid Tavi and Proteus wouldn't live through it, even though the compartment walls were lined with a thick layer of foam plastic, and the water level was controlled. Even so the ambulance cabin was hardly designed to carry dolphins at this speed.

Lagrange appeared again on the dumb video-screen, smiling in apology. His lips moved soundlessly. When he at last realized we couldn't hear him, he began explaining by gestures, that we must make a slow right turn. The *Mustang* jumped off a wave crest and hit the water so hard that everything went dim before my eyes, and the screen blacked out. Though the *Mustang* was built to stand worse trials than this, either age was beginning to tell or else certain underlying cybernetic maladies were to blame, for now the boat became mute and blind.

"Again they're trying to tell us what to do," said Kostya mournfully. "Advising us to turn right so the grampuses can hit us broadside."

Even our radio set went on the blink from the mad jolting and heavy blows. But not completely, that is, the receiver kept working a while longer with only occasional breaks.

Petya Samoilov and Khi flew over us again and dumped another dose of sleeping powders. Trying to cheer us up, somebody in the rescue team kept telling us about a worse fix he got into during an expedition to the Antarctic. But the receiver kept on blacking out, so we never did find out what had happened to the

fellow there. A couple of times, Lagrange's voice broke through. From the few words we caught, we realized that some new danger was lurking ahead.

"I guess he means the reefs," said Kostya. "But I've already changed course to miss those turtle-shaped rocks, and they are now somewhere north-west of us, or else we would have flown into them long ago. To tell the truth, I don't feel like getting mixed up with reefs, not at the moment."

Almost the whole time, Kostya had kept fixedly silent but now turned talkative all of a sudden. I suppose the soundless tension and feeling of responsibility weighed him down, so to cheer himself up and to change his mood, he now talked without stopping.

"By the Giant Squid and all the scum of the deeps!" he swore suddenly. "Who turned off the hydrophone? Did I do that? How is Proteus doing back there? Hey, Proteus? Are you all right, buddy?"

Proteus wasted no time in answering.

"Straight ahead is the 'Hard Death'! You mustn't go straight for it!"

We rose on the crest of a wave, and a flashing line crossed the radar screen but only for a moment, then we dropped into a "valley".

The sounding device showed a depth of thirty metres.

The pounding surf reverberated like distant thunder.

Kostya looked at me. There was a gleam of perplexity in his eyes. I guess the same feeling was reflected in mine because his usual set concentration came back, and I saw the knuckles

of his hands whiten as he gripped the helm. He didn't change course, but drove the jet-boat straight for the reefs. I reached out to grab the wheel.

"Leave it alone... it's the only way out. We'll cross on the crest of a wave."

He began throttling down the motors, and I soon observed that we were balanced right on the top of a watery ridge racing towards the reefs. As we hit shallow water, the wave grew bigger and the jet-boat lifted her bow so we could no longer see the raging foam sweeping the reef. But a terrible roar shook the whole boat, and our insides, too. I could imagine how Tavi and Proteus felt. The keel grazed the reefs, while the jet-boat swung broadside into a wave and, turning on its axis, jarred the transparent top against a cliff. And of a sudden, all was silent.

After the furious run and shuddering leaps, the *Mustang* seemed to be shuffling, slithering from side to side. I opened my eyes and tried to figure out what had happened.

Dark blue wisps of clouds were flying low over the transparent cover. The waves moaned and hissed as they washed over my aching head, running down my face, neck and under my collar.

"At last, you've come to!" I heard a familiar voice.

Turning my head, I saw Kostya holding a thermos. From its shining curved lips, a thin stream of water trickled over my head. It was nice to feel the icy water tingle against my skin.

"That's all there is." Kostya looked into the thermos and put it aside.

"What... that's all?" I asked in a voice that wasn't like mine. "There's no more water?"

"No water, and at last you've opened your eyes. Oh, what a time I had with you! You were sitting there, blissfully smiling and mumbling away like a deaf and dumb mermaid. To tell the truth, you scared me like the devil. Worse than Jack did. Why didn't you fasten your safety belt?"

"And you did, I suppose?"

"As for me, that's a different matter. I've had some experience where shipwrecks are concerned."

"That time with the yacht?"

"Could be."

"But I was there, too."

"As though being there counts. I'm talking about experience. Take this time, what experience did you get out of it? None at all, I'm afraid." Kostya measured me with a look, and spoke in the tone of a captain out of a book about pirates. "See if the hull's sound, mate. And the mast!"

"The mast? I don't get it."

"I meant you, exclusively, in person. Well, are your legs and arms whole, have you any pain in your chest or stomach?"

"I seem all right. Only a bit of a headache."

Kostya's face lit up with a smile.

"You see how my surf-riding came in handy—'racing on the waves'! But in Hawaii the surf runs higher. Remember? And did you notice how smartly I took this little barrier? Real elegant, I would say."

"You call that elegant!" I cried, feeling a bump on my head as big as a fist.

Paying no attention, Kostya went on boasting.

"I'm not surprised it worked out so well. Cleverly done. That's what it means to have balanced reflex activity."

"Who has?"

"Can't you guess?"

Probably I really had hit my head pretty hard, because only now did I remember about Tavi and Proteus and felt downright sick. I broke into a sweat and my head grew dizzy. My eyes glanced questioningly at the stern.

"Everything's all right, though they went through more than you did," said Kostya, reassuringly. "I opened their compartment on the reef when we first hit a coral bush. They were here a while ago and told me they were all right. Our interpreter has shut up shop. The whole works has, as a matter of fact!" Kostya burst into laughter and slapped his hand on the control panel.

I guess my face expressed my thoughts so clearly that Kostya hastened to reassure me.

"Don't worry, I haven't gone crazy. It's perfectly natural if I'm a bit excited. Aren't you glad everything turned out so well? We sure made a fool of Black Jack. We're close to honest-to-goodness land, or fairly near... see, the palm trees are just visible. The wind screen is all cracked. But take a look down here, a bit lower. See? We're safely hidden behind the barrier reef. The boys should arrive on the jet-boats within half an hour. Better roll up our sleeves and dig into the electronic gadgets. We used to put together rather good transistor sets, remember?" He looked at me

with deep meaning, like a conspirator. "You know, it wouldn't be bad to lose all communication with everybody for a while. A bit sorry for our friends, though. They'll start a world-wide search. Call in the Indian Ocean and Pacific fleets, and the air will be black with aeroplanes, not to speak of the *Kolymaga*. In our age, it's not easy to get lost. Wait, I just thought of a brilliant idea, but it's a secret for now."

Using the emergency device, we finally managed to open up the cabin wide enough so we could get out of the boat. We hoped to move closer inshore and anchor.

Tavi told me that the killer whales were pretty far off the reef, hunting mackerel and waiting for us to start back to the floating island. Tavi advised us not to do it before help arrived, and suggested that we stay on the atoll. He and Proteus had already visited the lagoon where they did away with a couple of tiger sharks. From the merry whistling with which Tavi ended his message, you might think we had landed in a little bit of heaven.

Leaving me with the dolphins, Kostya opened the bow hatch and vanished in the bowels of the *Mustang*. He stayed inside for about twenty minutes, whistling the brilliant march from "The Jolly Shrimps". Still whistling the same tune, he crawled out of the hatch and, still whistling, scanned the low shoreline with its sparse growth of slanting, twisted palms. Beyond a narrow strip of land, one could see a blue, rippling lagoon.

"The more I see of this place, the more I like it," said Kostya, not turning round. "And you know what? I couldn't adjust the motors... a

short circuit somewhere," he added, with a note of suspicious-sounding regret. "The transmitter doesn't work, it keeps going dead. So we have only one-way communication, I'm sorry to say." Giving a deep sigh, he appealed to me: "Shouldn't you go on the air and say a few words about our dismal situation? It'll keep us busy for a day or two just fixing the motors. Tell them the jet-boat looks like a big tin packed with scrap metal. No, better not, or we'll have an airborne landing operation on our hands."

ISLAND X

Even on the leeward side, the waters surrounding the atoll surged and broke against the reefs. No matter how clever Kostya was trying to be, we wouldn't have been able to make it home today anyway.

Tavi reported that they had heard of a channel through the reefs leading into the lagoon, but they personally had never been here before because the area was considered to be very dangerous. Many brave dolphins had died upon the sharp rocks seeking a way through the reef. According to Tavi, Kharita alone, in her youth, had been in the lagoon and that was only during a rare dead calm.

"It's even dangerous for us to cross the reefs, at present," said Tavi. "The sharp corals can destroy as easily as a killer whale's teeth. We must wait a night and a day, then we might try getting through to the ocean. Though it's just as nice here as it is at the island that floats

like a jelly fish. But not so deep and there's lots of fish and eatable molluscs."

The dolphins swam off to search for the passage into the lagoon. Luckily, the electronic interpreter began working and the dolphins kept us supplied with information. They gleefully announced that the killer whales, "ashamed" of their failure, had waited a while near the breakers and then dived to the great deeps. Now they were a few miles from the island: their signals were hard to receive.

The dolphins guided us along a twisting fairway that led into a wide canal faced with slabs of coral-like limestone. Part of the facing had already crumbled away from the walls. Nevertheless, the canal still preserved features of an excellent piece of hydro-engineering. Squat towers of grey cement, eroded by the waves, stood on each side of the canal entrance from where glimpses could be seen of odd-looking structures, with the same limestone facing, stretching along the shores. What purpose they served was a mystery.

Another strange thing immediately hit the eye: the bay or lagoon formed a perfect circle. I left the boat and walked along an embankment, polished by the winds and waves; and all the time I wondered why our ancestors had reconstructed the atoll. It was clearly unsuitable for industrial purposes, because no ship of even average tonnage could pass through the canal into the bay.

The camping site we chose on the shore was not very good. There was no shelter anywhere from the wind. A gleam of water could be seen beyond the walls of some ruins. A few coconut

palms grew near by, but not one coconut lay on the ground, not even an empty shell—the wind had swept the shore absolutely clean.

Beyond the white line of surf beating on the reefs, I could see the long shapes of jet-boats. They were searching about trying to locate the killer whales. However, at last realizing that Jack had withdrawn his forces, our friends saluted us with a series of coloured flares, drew up in formation and soon vanished on a course north-east. For another half an hour, Kostya held radio talks with Lagrange and the boat crews.

When he finally stepped ashore, I was intrigued by the expression on his face. After all we'd been through, his eyes shone and he simply radiated gladness.

"I even got the transmitter working," he yelled in my ear, for the wind went whistling past and fairly tore the words from his mouth, whipping them far out to sea. "When I found out where we've landed, there were questions galore. Yes indeed! I had a few questions myself to ask. You know, we can't get out of here till the wind drops, and you can see for yourself it has plenty of power still in store. You'll never guess where that confounded Jack chased us. All the boys are mad with jealousy! Even Nilssen. He relieved Lagrange. And he said he envied us, too."

"Nilssen? Envies us? He said that to cheer us up."

Kostya's eyes widened at this, and he gave a snort of contempt.

"Look, this is Island X, or The Ring of Jasper. That's where the K-whales chased us!"

I'd heard a word or two about the island from

Petya Samoilov. But he knew little himself, only that a few people had been killed here a couple of years ago, trying to get through the breakers. Ever since, the Ocean Travel Safety Association had put in force a special resolution forbidding stops at the island by ships of any class. Hydroplanes alone could land in the lagoon, and that by special permission from the Association and, for some reason, from the Committee for Control of Harmful Admixtures. Once, when I was poring over the map during a duty shift at the Central Post, my attention was drawn to a small circle among the reefs. And again Nature's amazing inventiveness rather surprised me. But with that, my interest in the island petered out. Each day brought us so many new impressions that Island X was drowned in them as surely as a drop of spray among foaming breakers.

"Nilssen said the island's man-made," Kostya yelled in my ear. "It was built about a hundred years ago... they used directed blasting. No literature on it exists. A puzzle to this day. So let's start...."

"Start what?" I interrupted.

"Exploring... digging"

"We haven't even shovels."

"We'll find them," insisted Kostya, confident as usual, and then suggested we have a feast to mark the beginning of our "great work".

But the wind soon put a stop to Kostya's fine ideas of making a fire and having a feast. The wind had fallen off at first, but now it gained in force and began to blow so hard that the coconut shells we had so patiently gathered were swept out to sea.

We boarded the *Mustang* and went in search of a better camping place. On the western side of the ring of land, the strip was somewhat wider and there was a growth of palms that shook under the wind. Probably this grove was responsible for the island's second romantic name: The Ring of Jasper.

"Why— 'of Jasper'?" wondered Kostya. "Should be 'with jasper'. But even that calls for a stretch of the imagination. Though if you looked down on it from a satellite, I guess the ring would appear green against the white foam."

We crossed the bay, and near the shore the jet-boat entered a "zone of calm". The palms gave generous protection to a small strip of water and dry land. Here we found the remains of greenish cement landing steps descending to the water. I pushed a mooring rope through a large bronze ring hanging on the docking wall, and pulled the stern of the boat against the steps. The ring gave out a mournful sound as it struck against hard stone.

"Look!" said Kostya in a shaky voice. "Imagine, man hasn't set foot in this place for decades. What solemn desolation!"

We stood on one of the green steps that was still intact and, like the early explorers, stared at the long deserted shoreline. The trunks of the palms pressed close together, crowns rustling, and formed a wall. Thick bushes grew in the narrow openings between the trees and along the edge of the grove. Dry palm leaves covered the cobblestone landing area. Coconuts lay scattered here and there, and among them scurried big land crabs—coconut thieves! Casting us a glance of curiosity, a brownish Nor-

way rat hurried past. Kostya stared after it.

"I never had much of a friendly feeling towards rats," he remarked, disgruntled. Though this species, I believe, eats only nuts... but, probably, because they've no alternative. We'll have to use this oasis as a dining room and spend the night on our faithful *Mustang*."

The dry coconut shells made wonderful fuel: they burned slowly, gave a lot of heat and hot coals. Proteus and Tavi caught us two "marine parrots". Kostya quickly cleaned them, picked up a dry palm leaf which he stripped down to the stem, and slipped the fish fillets on it.

"The most ancient way of cooking food over a fire," he informed me, as if he had just returned from an excursion into the Stone Age. "Too bad we've no spices...."

I listened silently, using my vibration knife to clean the fibre off the coconuts and cut two holes in them. Most of the nuts had long been ripe and contained little milk, or else it was sour. But several were full of cool, sweet milk that tasted simply delicious. Using the nuts as natural cups, I filled them with the precious milk and set them out on the stones of the century-old landing place. Who had walked here last? I wondered. Why had our ancestors needed this coral ring? What for? Maybe they had intended to build a whole archipelago of such islands, and it never occurred to them they could use rock for casting, the same as ore?

I was about to share my thoughts with Kostya, when we both heard a crackling in the grove. Somebody was working his way towards the lagoon, crashing through the bushes. He couldn't be far away. We heard heavy footsteps,

the crunch of sand, and then the sound of hard bootsoles on the rocks.

"There'll be three for dinner," said Kostya merrily. "But who could it be? Not...."

Before he could finish, a powerful stream of water came pouring from the densest undergrowth and, in the wink of an eye, our fire and dinner were washed away. We happened to be sitting some distance from the fire, and this saved us from serious peril.

The stream of water was so strong that it knocked out a piece of green cement when it hit a crack. All this got through to us only later, when the danger was over and we were able to realize what had happened. For the first few moments, we were paralysed by the suddenness and the strangeness of the attack. We sat stunned, our hands instinctively shielding our faces from the stream of water. Then, as if by command, we rolled aside and down towards the steps. The stream of water, breaking off, hissed as it retreated into the bush. Hunched over, we sat on the top step, not daring to move.

Kostya looked at me, shrugged, and wiped the water from his face.

"What's the big idea of playing such a joke?" he called out, loudly.

In answer there came a creaking, a familiar hiss, and we were drenched. This time, the jet of water was aimed upwards and descended on us like rain. With a silent gesture, Kostya warned me not to move and slowly raised his head above the edge of the landing. His face expressed such surprise that I also took a peek. And was no less surprised than he. Twenty metres away, on the edge of the palm grove, stood the

bulky figure of a robot. It was a clumsy thing, and you could see it had been made in an age when insufficient attention was paid to outward form in manufacturing such machines. But, to his designers, it might have seemed the picture of elegance. We were mostly struck by the bulky size of its whole construction: a heavy body with no legs that moved on a crawler-cart; cylindrical tanks that swelled out on its back and sides. It had no eyes—only black round membranes in front and on each side and, as we later found out, on the back of its head. The robot had four arms: two long ones, hanging lifeless and almost touching the ground; two shorter ones, each holding a shining hose near the nozzle. One was out of order, but from the other a stream of blue seawater shot up into the sky. The robot's once smart-looking sheathing of coloured enamel was cracked on the body and arms, in places the enamel was chipped off revealing rusty iron.

We moved farther away from the active hose and studied the strange creature.

"Looks like it wants to put out the sun," said Kostya. "See, the hose is aimed straight at our poor old sun. Our fire wasn't enough for him."

Kostya was right. As soon as the sun which had peeped out through the clouds was again swallowed up, the robot turned off the water.

"A robot fireman," continued Kostya. "Must be a museum piece. I never saw anything like it.... Hey, you! What'd you put our fire out for?"

The robot remained silent. Apparently it only reacted to the warm infra-red rays of a

definite strength. The same thing occurred to Kostya.

"What d'you say if we have a go at this fellow?" he asked.

With cautious glances at the robot, we went deep into the grove and brought back a pile of dry leaves, then lit them. We ran off just in time, as the fireman washed out this fire, too.

"Not the shadow of a doubt," affirmed Kostya. "The robot reacts only to the infra-red part of the spectrum."

"But why hasn't it used up all the reserves of energy with trying to put out the sun? This isn't its first year on the island, if looks mean anything."

"That's strange, all right," agreed Kostya. "Maybe this iron fellow reacts only to definite objects, like our fires. And any burning of organic matter, in general. Perhaps they kept large supplies of fuel here and constructions with inflammable details."

"But the sun?"

"Leave the sun in peace!" It wasn't adjusted to the sun before but from long inaction something went out of kilter, so he turned on the hose. And it can't stop after being warmed up by our fire. Something's wrong with the robot's relays. I wonder how the thing works. The tanks must have been filled once with some sort of foamy mixture. I guess it's all used up or has evaporated by now. Don't you move an inch, and I'll try to get better acquainted with this gentleman.... Why, of course! See, the robot's turned off the water though the sun's still shining. Apparently, it's having a real nervous breakdown. Don't make such a terrible face. After

today's demonstration of my dexterity and presence of mind, d'you really think I can't dodge this monster?"

I tried to stop Kostya, but he waved his hand to me and began moving stealthily towards the fireman robot. Kostya approached it from an angle; the robot's head slowly turned and the hose nozzle also slowly moved down and was aimed straight at Kostya.

"Watch out!" I cried, as a stream of water burst from the round opening.

The robot turned out to be very quick or sensitive, rather, for it felt the warmth radiated by a man's body. The surge of water flew a metre above Kostya's head. Kostya threw himself flat and crawled quickly towards the robot. Before I could warn him about the second pair of arms, those two levers caught him up, like a pair of pincers, and tossed him aside. Being a good gymnast, Kostya landed on all fours like a cat.

"Did you see that?" he called happily. "He threw me away as if I were a burning log. We've put new life into him. Now we know what the second pair of arms are for. Let's go on with the experiment. It had such a beautiful beginning." He frowned and rubbed his sore knee. "Look here, you draw his attention from in front, and I'll try moving in from the rear so I can reach its nervous system. Don't be scared, and get some spunk into you. Use my method. But see it doesn't wash you into the lagoon. Come on, let's go. Now's the time... see? It wants to put out the sun again! Darn, too late. It's quit. Go ahead, anyway, and remember my method!"

I began moving up on the fireman, ready to dodge aside at any moment. The nozzle in its hand was motionless, but the head, rustily squeaking, turned this way and that. Keeping in mind Kostya's experience, I stopped five metres away from the robot.

The wind angrily bent the palms and shook their shaggy tops. Two coconuts fell, one near my feet while the other hit the robot's head with a hollow smack. From the second hose, inactive up to now, a foamy liquid began to drip and then blew out rainbow coloured bubbles. They fell on the concrete landing and slowly rolled towards the water, chased by a current of air.

Kostya suddenly appeared from behind the robot's back.

"See that?" he asked, swinging the long arm of the fireman back and forth. "Now it's clear why the circuits are on the blink. By the theory of probability, many a coconut has cracked him on the head since the island was deserted. Don't worry, I got to his vegetative system, pushed all the buttons and turned all the switches. The main thing is—I turned off the power supply. Somewhere around here there must be a solar or atomic power station...."

Suddenly a round object 1.5 metres in diameter dropped at a slanting angle into the lagoon and splashed down near the opposite shore, raising a column of spray. We caught a fleeting glimpse of the *Kolymaga* through low-flying clouds, and raced for the boat. Petya Samoilov's voice came over the radio.

"This is *Kolymaga*! *Kolymaga*! Calling the island! Come in! What's happened? I don't read you, over."

"Nothing special," answered Kostya. "We just came across an interesting robot, and messed around with it."

"And we thought.... Well, that's fine.... The parcel contains everything necessary. Forbidden to land in the lagoon owing to the wind. Lagrange, and especially Nilssen, are worried. They asked me to radio you that the palm grove may hold some unpleasant surprises, so stick to the shore."

Kostya's eyes lit up, and he gave me a significant wink.

"What kind of surprises?"

"They say the island was built a very long time ago, and some rockets could still be there."

"Meteorological?"

"No-o...."

"You mean nuclear missiles?"

"Right. Nuclear. I dropped a Geiger counter, just in case. Check the lagoon and shoreline. Don't poke your nose in the grove. How do you read me?"

"Not so good. Some static interference."

"I don't read you well, either. Let us know if anything comes up. We'll fly in tomorrow, as soon as the weather calms down."

A loud crackling came from the set, and we were cut off.

While we were talking with Petya, the dolphins had towed the parcel dropped by the *Ko-lymaga* over to our shore. There was an inflatable tent inside, lots of food and thermos bottles full of beverages. At the sight of so much food, we got hunger pangs. And for about ten minutes we ate everything we could get our hands on: grapes, fish, cream, roast beef, pa-

paya fruit and plankton butter. Then washed it all down with pineapple juice. Over coffee, which we drank while nibbling Indian crackers, Kostya made plans.

"With such a lot of supplies plus the lagoon and tent, we could live here as long as we wanted. We'll put the tent up over there, in the shadow of the fireman."

Two rats passed by, dragging their naked tails on the ground. I automatically moved back.

"Don't be afraid," said Kostya. "In a tent like this, you needn't be afraid, not even of crocodiles. I know this kind of tent. Complete isolation from all undesirable neighbours. Air-conditioning, too. And filters to keep out mosquitoes but which, thank heaven, the island hasn't got."

After supper, we blew up the tent and pitched it in the shade of the palms. Clouds formed a very dense cover. The wind didn't die down. On the contrary, it was rising. And now the clouds raced swiftly across the sky.

It was fast growing dark, and a fine drizzle of rain began to fall.

We went to say good-night to Tavi and Proteus, and I told them about our meeting with the robot, letting them know we were spending the night ashore in the tent.

"Too bad," said one of them. "Here we'd be all together, but there you'll be alone. In the green seaweed—he meant the palms—there might be more iron men."

"In case of danger, we'll move into the jet-boat," said Kostya, reassuringly. "May the night be the same as the day!" This phrase wasn't said ironically. It was simply the tra-

ditional form of farewell used among dolphins at night.

"So be it," rang the answer from the hydrophone. We reached overboard to squeeze the flippers of our friends and stroke their backs.

The rain was now pouring down. Streams of water ran down the tent walls and burbled under the floor. In spite of being tired out, Kostya and I couldn't sleep so we kept going over the events of the day. Finally Kostya yawned, his words trailed off, and he fell asleep.

The wind came in great gusts and the surf thundered so, that the whole island seemed to quake as if ready to fly to pieces. I tried to picture up the people who had built the round atoll, erected buildings on it, and then lived here. Probably, this island was one of the first constructions of man built with the aim of conquering the ocean, I thought. One of the first prototypes of our floating giant of basalt. I couldn't believe that intelligent human beings would waste so much time and money on building a secret launch pad for ballistic missiles aimed at the great cities of Europe. I remembered the words of our history teacher, Andrei Groshev: "It was the age of great achievements and great hopes."

In the night, an amusing thing happened. The tent suddenly collapsed, almost stifling us. The rats had gnawed right through the fabric and let the air out from between the double walls. We found ourselves in a cramped, stuffy bag, and barely escaped from it with the aid of my vibration knife. Thank goodness, I always have it with me. Expedition tents are made from sezalite, a new fabric so strong that

an ordinary knife won't go through it. Angry, all in a sweat, we stood near the collapsed tent, breathing hard and trying to restrain the insulting words we were ready to throw at each other. We didn't know, at first, who or what was guilty of our early and unpleasant awakening, though each of us blamed the other for not pitching the tent properly.

"A good thing we woke up so early," said Kostya suddenly. "Just look how beautiful it is, all around us. What a sky!"

The trade-winds were like a soft sigh. The constellations shone brightly overhead. The greenish light of a waning moon filtered between the tree trunks. The sea rolled with cold blue luminescence against the reef.

"There's something fantastic about it," whispered Kostya. "And to think we were sleeping, switched off from living, instead of feasting our eyes on the beauty of the universe. Even the robot is under a spell. Look at him!"

The fireman, arrayed in a fantastic mantel of light and shadow, stood in a trance with his head tilted to one side, his membranes gleaming with the strange light of cat's eyes. He looked as if he were alive.

Where the moonlight fell on the tent, two huge rats were busily gnawing away at the fabric.

"Scram!" yelled Kostya.

The rats raised their pointed, whiskered heads, and resumed their former occupation. The outlines of several more rats could be seen in the shadows.

"What do they find so tasty in our tent?" asked Kostya, and gave the answer himself. "A yearning for civilization. Their emigrant

ancestors came here from other countries where there was something else to chew besides coconut shells. So their genetic memories told them that the Rat Gods had presented them with a tasty dish."

It wasn't really so funny, but we laughed so loudly and happily that the rats squeaked in chorus and darted away.

We didn't lie down again that night. We didn't feel sleepy and, besides, what was the use? In an hour it would be sunrise and we had a lot of work to do. We had to explore the island, check the lagoon, repair the jet-boat so we could get through the reef without anyone's help. Kostya suggested we have breakfast on the *Mustang* so we'd be ready to start at daybreak. During breakfast we were busy talking to Tavi and Proteus, as well as Lia Gavara or Aunt Lia, as we called her, who was on duty at the island Post. She was a plump, kindly black woman, the only arachnologist on the island. She specialized in spiders. We often brought her rare specimens of her favourite insects and she had a motherly affection for us.

"Boys! There you are at last! I kept tuned in on your channel all night, but all I saw was empty seats on the *Mustang*. All the best from the islanders. You probably have no idea what an interesting place you've landed in. An almost fully shut-in lagoon, and there's high radioactivity. But don't worry, it's only a little above normal yet high enough to promote mutations. How are you getting on? As far as I can see, you're looking fine."

We told her about the robot and the tent, and had a good laugh together. Then she mentioned

how much she envied us, but the doctors had forbidden her to go on distant excursions or even dive deeper than a couple of metres.

"Okay," said Kostya. "We'll ask Tavi and Proteus to find some spiders for you, and we'll keep our eyes skinned, too."

"Can't thank you enough, boys, only be careful...."

She kept trying to interrupt and tell us something, but we put her off with a stream of info, and even the dolphins were on the air. Swimming alongside, Proteus and Tavi transmitted through the hydrophone that they had never seen such a perfectly formed bay. It looked as if a gigantic whale had rolled over and over in the same spot, making a deep hollow that resembled a sea-urchin with the top half bitten off. They were also surprised at the sheer drop of the shoreline, the even bottom and the almost complete absence of coral.

There were only occasional growths of coral polyps. Steel structures were piled up on the eastern shore, providing shelter for octopuses. A small ship lay at the bottom, in the middle of the bay....

"If only somebody could take a look inside," said Lia, with a sigh of regret.

We kept quiet, for research of a sunken ship would take up too much time.

"If you have the chance," she added.

"If you have the chance" suited us fine, and we nodded amicably, listening to the dolphins' description of an underwater forest of seaweed they had taken a quick look at just before sunset, where they had met a whole school of pig-bird-lizards....

"You'll certainly have to visit that forest," put in Lia. "And please watch out for anything unusual."

"All right, we'll find you a spider-mutant," promised Kostya.

Her plump face widened, not so much from her smile as from the bad adjustment of the tele-screen.

"Now, boys, one thing more," she said, suddenly serious. "I'm supposed to warn you to watch your step on the island." Again her face shone with a smile and a cunning gleam sparkled in her eyes. "I almost forgot to tell you. A charming girl at the meteorological spacelab was trying to contact you today for almost a whole hour."

Lia's voice broke off, and a faint buzz of static came from the loudspeakers.

Unaware that our receiver had lost the gift of speech, she kept on talking while we sat stunned before the screen trying to lipread and make out what else Biata had asked Lia to pass on.

As usual, the tropic night ended sharply. The eastern sky glowed with light and the sun rose out of the sea. The cacaphony of waking birds came from the shore. The dolphins greeted the burning orb of the day with a special dance, whirling dizzily on their tails around the *Mustang*. Then they swam off on their personal affairs.

Kostya and I started off to explore the palm grove. We found several "dead" robots scattered through it. Covered with rust, some were

still standing, others lay stretched out. Their power supply had long been exhausted. They were made of low-grade steel, reliance being probably placed on an anti-corrosion coating. But the enamel hadn't stood up under the sharp changes of temperature and humidity, besides time had an effect, of course. A flock of Australian budgies, or budgerigars, flew overhead and drowned out other sounds with their chatter, apparently in protest of our intrusion. Parrots nested in the crowns of palms and in bushes. Some nests rested on the shoulders and heads of the inactive robots. From the instruments they still held in their hands, they had once been gardeners who weeded the bushes and grass between the palms and cared for the roads and pathways. Now, the roads were so overgrown with thorny bushes that they were impassible, and we could only move between the palm trees.

Making our way through the undergrowth, we tried to figure out what Lia had said after the sound went dead on the telescreen. What had Biata wanted to tell us? The main thing was, which of us did she want most to see, Kostya or me? But the deeper we moved into the grove, the more our thoughts became fixed on this mysterious island. Why had it been deserted in such a hurry? The "dead" robot-gardeners were dumb witnesses that it had been a fast getaway. Long afterwards, they had kept moving among the palms, trimming and weeding the bushes, cleaning the pathways. The poor fireman was still carrying out his duties when we first arrived.

We entered a house that stood in a wild,

deserted garden. The furniture and the library were still intact. In the kitchen, the electric range was still connected to the power source, the refrigerator was working and held a large supply of food. Excellent reproductions of impressionist art hung on the walls. However, now the house was occupied by parrots which swept through the open windows in a colourful stream.

"Those people had some good reason for deserting the island," said Kostya, after we'd left the house and were walking along a pathway not yet overgrown with verdure. "Something threatened them, that's sure. So they dropped everything, and ran. Their only ship was sunk off shore, probably on the day of the tragedy."

"Perhaps nobody was saved," I suggested.

"They must have been," said Kostya, confidently. "There are no signs of an attack. They were warned, and managed to get away in planes."

The pathway led us to a circular platform laid with green cement slabs, similar to those on the landing stage. Compared to the neglect prevalent everywhere else, the platform was a model of cleanliness and order. A faint sheen lay on the opaque surface, and not one leaf, twig or nutshell was in sight. It looked as if the robot-cleaners had really put their hearts into sweeping and washing it down.

On the borders of the platform arose strange-looking massive domed structures, windowless, with tightly shut steel doors. And we noticed round hatches set in the middle of the circular platform. Four of them had open cover-plates.

We approached them cautiously, as if walking on thin ice, sliding glances in all directions. Suddenly, a door opened in the windowless structure and two robots came out. They looked well preserved, almost brand new, and were pushing carts ahead of them that creaked and hissed on the pavement.

"Robot vacuum-cleaners," cried Kostya. "Coming to clean up, though the platform's as bright as a new pin. Hello, boys!"

The robot dustmen looked our way, but continued their programmed work without saying a word.

"Serious fellows!" said Kostya.

I noticed that all the cracks in the asphalt had been filled in, some patches were quite fresh.

Keeping the robots in view, we reached the first hatch. The round opening went deep into the island, and the beam of our pocket torch was reflected back by water lying below.

"Empty," remarked Kostya. "It must be about thirty metres deep, not counting the lower level filled with water. I wonder what it was used for."

"For missiles armed with nuclear warheads," I suggested.

Kostya sneered.

"D'you really believe all this, as well as the island, was built only for launching missiles? The island was meant for something a lot more important than that."

I didn't bother arguing, because now, from what we'd seen of the island, it was really hard to assure myself that anyone would spend so much time and energy on a single insane objective.

The robot dustmen, clanking and clattering, had finished their first round and began a second, nearer the centre. We stood beside the fourth hatch a moment, watching the robots, and then walked towards the building. Before we had taken ten steps, the warning howl of a siren burst from concealed loudspeakers. It lasted several seconds.

The dustmen moved unhurriedly towards their bunker. Several neighbouring doors swung open, letting out a whole crowd of robots who lined up in formation. Judging by their colour and shape, each of these models had some special job to perform. Some were massive heavyweights whose function was carrying heavy loads; others were more supple and light, possibly electricians, installers, mechanics and maybe radiation disactivators. There were also firemen, twin brothers of the first robot we had met.

"It looks like a ceremonial reception," said Kostya. "Apparently they haven't been visited by the big brass for a long time. Let's go over and chat with the boys. Some of them look as if they were contemporaries of our Penelope."

The moment we tried to approach the line of robots, a powerful voice from one of the hidden loudspeakers brought us to a halt. (It spoke English.)

"Stop! Don't move! You have violated Regulation No. 8-3-12. Wait for the guards!"

What could we do but obey!

"I don't particularly like the looks of this," confessed Kostya. "The whole system is still working that guards the hatches to the pits and heaven knows what else. Strange, I wonder why Aunt Lia didn't warn us? I'll bet this morning

she already knew all about this cosy little island. Wait a minute! Did you notice before signing off how serious she was, how she kept repeating the same thing at least twice? But all our thoughts were on Biata. Remember, before the sound went off, she said 'I must warn you....' Oh, women, women! What other surprises have you got in store for us?"

I had the feeling that the last words weren't addressed to Aunt Lia alone.

We had been waiting for five and a half minutes.

"The guards apparently aren't functioning," said Kostya. "Something must have gone wrong with them. See, even these steel roughnecks look sad and don't know what measures to take. No orders have come from the command post. Let's slide our feet back towards the hatches. The warning system isn't working there. If we stay here a whole hour, we'll be fried to a crisp, it's as hot as a frying pan on this platform. The wind doesn't reach this far and, besides, there isn't a breeze anywhere. I'll go first."

"One more move, and I shoot!" a voice thundered across the platform. "The guard is on his way. Wait!"

It looked as though we were caught inside an electronic signal-system zone, and every move we made was registered. I had the feeling we were being watched by somebody, a living person, who was having a sly laugh at our expense. Kostya was struck by the same thought.

"He's grinning at us," he whispered. "What if one of them is still here?"

"How old would he be, d'you think?"

"Right... much too old.... But our old man isn't much younger. Maybe this one's immortal?"

"They couldn't make cyborgs then."

"A lot we know about what they could or couldn't do," said Kostya with a significant wink. He inhaled deeply and called out: "Where's your guard? We can't stand here in such heat any longer! Send him at once, or else...."

The threat died on Kostya's lips. Another robot, and a strange one at that, stumbled out of the bushes to the right of the buildings. He was squat and fat, something like a penguin, on short legs with crawler-feet. He fell flat on the asphalt with a thud, only to spring upright again like a weighted doll. He quickly moved towards us, and stopped five paces away.

He wore a silly, self-satisfied look and coloured sparks flashed in his eye-slits. His lever-hands held two objects resembling water-pistols.

Kostya greeted him.

"Good morning! How's life, old boy? Why are you so heavily armed?"

The robot creaked in answer as he used all his strength to turn his back on us.

"Don't talk! Excuses are useless. You'll be questioned there. Follow me."

"What d'you mean by 'there'? Where are we going?"

"Don't talk! Follow me!"

"How can we follow you when you're creaking like a rusty door-hinge and stay glued to the same spot?"

Finally, with much difficulty, the "soldier" turned at an angle of 180 degrees and, clanking loudly, moved along an old trail.

We followed him, and the three eyes at the back of his head followed our every movement. One hand was twisted behind, covering us with a pistol.

We walked as if hypnotized, not taking our eyes off the black bore of the gun which swung threateningly, now at Kostya, now at me.

"A more idiotic situation would be hard to find," growled Kostya.

As soon as the soldier stepped onto the road covered with thick bushes, his crawler-feet kept getting tangled in roots and bushes, so that he fell several times. We wanted to slip away, taking advantage of his helplessness, but noticed in time that the soldier managed to keep us covered no matter what his position. Nothing came of trying to lag behind, either; the robot also stopped, and spoke in a tone that promised no good.

"Do not slow down! The distance between us must not exceed three metres." Making a pause, he added significantly: "To avoid trouble."

"What a way of talking!" Kostya grumbled. "Full of archaisms. 'To avoid'! And by 'trouble' he means a shot in the belly. Did you notice he keeps aiming at my belly all the time? Don't drop behind! You can expect anything from this steel idiot. Hurry up! And, for the love of heaven, don't fall. Give me your hand. We'll get out of this, somehow. They got out, and we'll find a way, too."

"Who d'you mean by 'they'?"

"The ones who made a fast getaway. Look! A truck with baggage. It broke down and they didn't have time to fix it. Well, we're in no hurry, and we'll get out of this jam eventually."

Palm trees had grown up around the truck with its rusted body: tree trunks pressed around it so that it looked fenced in. Not far from the truck stood two robots, firmly held in a tangle of lianas.

"Our Tommy won't get stuck," grumbled Kostya. "He's got a good memory. Look how he goes around the bushes, retracing his old trail. Wait, is he stuck after all?"

Scraping away with his crawler-feet, Tommy tried to pull them loose from a root that looped up from the ground. We looked on with interest as the soldier, realizing he couldn't break the root, went into reverse and passed round the obstacle.

"Good for you, Tommy!" Kostya praised him.

We had now walked about a hundred metres. Tommy was visibly tiring. His movements grew lazy, he often stopped before a branch barring his way as if solving a difficult problem. Then he carefully moved ahead.

"Our Tommy's getting out of breath," said Kostya. "His batteries are running down."

Suddenly the bushes ended, and Tommy rolled cheerfully along a green asphalt path leading to a low building with a wide-open door. "To avoid trouble" we ran after him.

Tommy stopped at the door, dropped his arms so that the guns pointed at the ground, and his whole appearance indicated that he had completed his mission. And now let others deal with us.

It was hard to believe we had got rid of him so easily, and Kostya addressed him with a long speech of thanks for the good treatment accorded us during the difficult trip.

The robot was silent, except for an occasional tremor as if he was trying to lift his guns and blast first Kostya and then me, for making fun of him. It is hard to say what our Tommy would have done next, if Kostya hadn't got the brilliant idea of roaring at him in a voice hard with authority.

"Well, blockhead, what are you waiting for? You carried out the order. Go to quarters at once!"

It's not likely that Kostya instinctively guessed the phrases programmed to control the robot. But apparently the tone used and the number of syllables in the three sentences had something to do with it.

At any rate, Tommy obediently about faced and rolled down the path to a barely visible building thickly surrounded by greenery.

A minute ago, our only wish was to escape from the robot and this open door, but now the mysterious gloom within drew us like a magnet.

"Let's risk it," suggested Kostya and stepped inside without waiting for my consent. "The door doesn't close. Come in, I've," he called.

I crossed the threshold, but not without misgivings.

We walked slowly, looking all around. Concealed lighting switched on ahead of us, casting illumination on plastic panels that imitated redwood. The lights went out automatically behind us. Doors on both sides were evenly spaced. Judging by the signs printed there, the rooms contained apparatus of some kind. The signs were printed in black letters on a gold background, and lit up if we stopped at a door. The floor was laid with a pleasant-toned syn-

thetic runner. The corridor sloped noticeably downwards into the depths of the island. I noticed there were automatic sliding steel doors in the corridor walls.

"If they ever start working, we'll have some time getting them open," remarked Kostya. His breezy optimism always amazed me. He never doubted for a minute that if all the doors suddenly closed we would get out anyway.

The corridor took a sharp turn right. A bit farther on, we entered a very spacious room though, at first, we weren't aware of it because the same sliding doors were there in the wall. Gradually the room filled with light. We had the impression that a strong yellow light came pouring from the walls, flooding the room.

The first thing that hit the eye in this underground chamber was a very large cabin made of yellow transparent polymer, divided into two sections by a partition of the same transparent material. Each section had a narrow entrance with sliding lockable doors which were pushed back; you could see the nickel-plated catches on the edges. In one section, a chair lay overturned near the door. In the second there was no chair; for some reason or other, it had been thrown out beyond the threshold. Each section had a narrow table console of shiny brown plastic that extended from wall to wall. On each stood a microphone with an inflated neck, like a cobra, also control devices, switches and several rows of push-buttons.

We stood at the door of one of the sections.

"The operator's cabin," Kostya explained. "See, overhead there's a grilled screen for protection against high-frequency currents. The

place is stacked with electronic devices. But why were the operators locked in, and why were there two men on duty at the same time? One robot of average intelligence could run the whole works."

The wall above the consoles was made of clear diamond glass, and ten metres in front of this window was a large scanner screen. The image showed the familiar platform gleaming in the sunshine and surrounded by shaggy palm trees. The row of robots hadn't moved, and the hard-working dustmen were pushing around their portable vacuum-carts.

"D'you see those two big push-buttons at the edge of each control-panel? One panel is an exact duplicate of the other. Double-controls!"

I had immediately noticed these push-buttons—one yellow, the other red. The red button in the first cabin where we were standing was covered with a transparent cap pressed into a massive golden setting. In the second cabin, an identical cap lay on the floor, and near it another cap in a black setting. Kostya continued, inspired by his random conjectures.

"They pushed the yellow buttons and one red; then something frightened them and they scrambled in a hurry. And there's the cap from the red button! Wait here...."

Before I could stop him, he had darted through the narrow entry and approached the console.

"All the small buttons operate emergency mechanisms...." Kostya eagerly examined everything on the panel. "That is, in case the automation system gets out of order. Though it's still in wonderful shape, even now. In case of emergency. This one is the light switch. This,

for the water supply to the living quarters. Here are the door controls! Is that ever something! Now we could close them. The upper row controls the robots. But there's nothing written under the yellow button. Hey! Look here!" He picked up a long flat key from the floor. "It belongs to the red button. The shape is the same, as that of this slit. Shall we try it? Well, all right, I won't. You're always scared."

He slipped the key in his pocket and, for some reason, tiptoed out. On crossing the threshold, Kostya wiped the sweat from his forehead, though it was quite cool here in the underground premises.

"I continually had the feeling that the doors would suddenly clap to," he admitted.

"But you'd just have to push the button," I said.

"Fine thing! Call yourself a psychoanalyst! If it were that easy to get out, then why have the doors got such locks? There was no button on the console to open the cabin doors. Maybe there's a master control-panel somewhere. Or else they were opened by a special person after the two operators entered. Real mouse-traps. Imagine being locked up in such a box, and then have all twenty doors down the corridor shut behind you! Not the nicest feeling in the world. I guess that's why they pulled out the very first chance they got. The main thing is, what would have happened if that guy," and he nodded at the cabin he had just quitted, "hadn't dropped the key."

"We should find out first what the red button is for."

"Brilliant logic! I've, you're the most sensible person I ever met!" Kostya made a few more sarcastic remarks about me, and wiped his forehead again. "What a lot of mysteries our ancestors left behind them! Actually, they could have just calmly left the island in their own good time. After all, there's no visible danger. So many years have passed, yet nothing's changed." He glanced at the scanner. "Look at the swarm of parrots on the robots! You know, you could sit out a whole atom war in here. The storehouse is full of food. The air-conditioning is still working. And if a bomb were dropped, even then...." Kostya looked at the ceiling. "Must be at least twenty metres thick. Nobody ever dropped a bomb, but if they had, you couldn't find a safer shelter."

We began a further examination of the room. If you excluded the cabins with the grilled screen over the consoles and the snake-like microphones, the whole place was reminiscent of our Central Control Post. Especially the TV-com system. We slowly moved around the underground premises. When Kostya approached a panel, the concealed lighting burned brighter. Behind plastic shields of imitation stained oak, there was a gleaming mass of unbelievably complicated electronic devices. Kostya guessed my thoughts.

"All this only seems complicated," he remarked. "Primitive equipment always looks like that, at first glance. Perfection results in simplicity. That always holds true, I've!"

Though we were sharply aware of how the operators must have felt, imprisoned in their plastic boxes locked by many steel bolts, we

experienced no feeling of fear (except for the moments Kostya had spent in the cabin), but simply the curiosity that catches you when you steal into an attic room filled with all manner of discarded things. Neither Kostya nor I suffered from claustrophobia, probably because we were sure we could leave any time we wanted. And besides, the huge scanner screen brought in the image of birds, wind and the ocean. For the last time, we glanced at the scanner and then screamed with joy—Petya Samoilov and Khi were just stepping onto the round platform. Alarm and worry were written all over them.

"The footprints go towards the centre," said Khi. "Let's go."

More prudent, Petya stopped him.

"Wait! I'll go first and you stay here as reserve...."

"... and watch the robots catch you...."

Kostya put a stop to their argument.

"Hello, fellows!" he called into the mike. "We're in a nice cosy little underground shelter. They operated the whole outfit right from here.... Stop! Don't move on the platform, or you'll get acquainted with Tommy!"

The boys grinned.

"So everything's all right," said Khi, and quoted one of the sages of India. "Who seeks will find, but not always what he is looking for." Then he added: "We're twice as lucky. We found what we were looking for and what we weren't. The island's densely populated with robots."

On the threshold of the control room, we looked back and waved at Petya and Khi, for-

getting it was a one-way scanner system. And we saw the doors of both cabins slam shut simultaneously, while a steel plate began slowly sliding out of the wall right before us. Without a word, we ran, hearing the thud of closing armoured doors behind our backs.

"You certainly gave us a bit of a scare," said Petya. "What did you do... decide to blow yourselves up?" Then he told us what Aunt Lia had wanted to pass on that morning. "The island can explode any minute. It was supposed to, years ago. For some reason, it didn't."

"Now we know what the red button was for," said Kostya.

Talking it over, we all agreed that the island would hold out a bit longer and there wouldn't be much risk if we stayed on a few hours longer to take a good look round.

But nothing of interest came of it. The Geiger counter failed to indicate where the atomic station was sited. Probably, it was included in the same deep block as the main control panel, somewhere in the very depths and well isolated by lead slabs. At any rate, that's the conclusion we came to.

On the way to the lagoon, we entered a different house. The window panes of this one were still intact, the doors tightly shut, and the parrots hadn't got in to set up their own sort of housekeeping. The front door swung open hospitably as we all mounted a wide porch made of the green cement which was so popular here. The hall was pleasantly cool, for the windows were frosted over from the salt spray coming from the ocean and scarcely let in any sunlight. The house was quite liveable, and the comfor-

table old-fashioned furniture rather well preserved. We wandered through the rooms. I had the feeling that the people living here might come in any moment, and actually caught myself blushing, failing to find suitable words of excuse.

Kostya and I met in the sitting-room, which held a huge television set and a good transistor radio. Kostya turned the radio on and we listened to some ancient music of India.

"They already had 'everlasting' batteries," said Kostya. "It doesn't sound bad."

We settled down in low easy chairs before a long coffee table with a brown lacquered finish. Kostya reached out to touch a grimacing mask on a wall panel, and doors swung open to reveal a bar. The shelves were filled with many bottles of wine, and a few glasses.

"Hay, just look at that!" cried Petya, coming in. "Real alcohol—nowadays occasionally prescribed for us by the doctors."

"What d'you think?" asked Kostya. "Will we die if..."

"...we imbibe, without benefit of prescription?" finished Petya.

"Ye-es. A taste, anyway. How festive they look!"

"Well, if you want my opinion, I think we could give it a try," said Petya, and looked at me questioningly.

"And the radioactivity?" I asked.

"Just a bit above normal."

"A perfectly acceptable radioactivity," put in Kostya, and took out a bottle of Spanish muscatel.

Then Khi came in, holding some age-yellowed

sheets of pulpwood paper. He dropped them on the table.

"Found them on the floor in the bedroom. A real chaos in there. I thought they might prove interesting. Some kind of notes.... Oh, muscatel! I've read about that, but never had the luck to taste it."

At first, nobody realized the importance of Khi's find. The muscatel was superb. It made you feel a bit light-headed. Kostya was on the point of taking another bottle, but Petya stopped him.

"Sorry, boys, but the radioactivity here really is above normal. Besides, it's time to go. We've stayed too long as it is."

"Then let's take some along for analysis," suggested Kostya.

"Well, if it's in the interest of science, I guess we could," Khi remarked in support, and you could see the wine had gone to his head.

"Motion carried unanimously!" cried Kostya, and then picked up the sheets of paper for a closer look.

There were ten pages, written in a sprawling, uneven hand, the letters large.

Kostya started to read aloud, and occasionally we put our heads together to decipher the incomprehensible or abbreviated English words. It was the diary of a soldier who had taken part in one of the wars which, as was known from historical newsreels, were continually being waged in that age. Edgar Cowley, the author of the diary, had made the entries erratically, sometimes missing a month at a time. Something had prevented him from making regular entries. Below are a few extracts from the diary which

was published in its entirety in the *Historical News* Issue No. H-3-9, and also put out in the publication *Discoveries and Finds*.

Oct. 3, 1967.

Only five of us are left out of a detachment of a hundred men. Sheer luck. Now all that matters is to sleep, eat decent food and not think about anything. Not such a bad life, by God!

Nov. 8.

The six days in Atami were like a wonderful dream. Good-bye, Marica. Not so long ago, I felt like a human being. But again I'm growing into a professional murderer.

Nov. 20.

Before a raid we take 'Bye-bye conscience' pills. That's what we call the new dope. After a single dose, each one of us is ready to kill his own mother without turning a hair.

Dec. 3.

Strange that I haven't once been wounded up to now, though all the boys I started out with are already rotting in zinc coffins or have been eaten by animals in the jungles. Though I don't hang back, and I've got a reputation for bravery. But bravery's pure rot. I simply don't care a hoot. I know I won't get out of here. What a dirty trick it would be if I stayed alive after all this!

May 10, 1968.

In six weeks, I'll be out of this hell. Is it really possible that all this will be left behind, and I can wash from my soul the dirt, blood and tears of my victims? Anything's possible, I guess. There are many scoundrels much worse than me. It all depends on how you look at what's going on. The main thing is to keep alive in

yourself some human qualities. Do I have any left?

May 15.

I met John Hayman from a Green Berets detachment today. He had just returned from a regular "excursion". He complained that the work wasn't worth the pay. Now he only gets ten bucks instead of fifteen for an ear off his murdered victims, and only for the right ear at that. Because of the drop in price, Hayman lost & 180.00.

We used to go to school together. He was a quiet kid. Liked to talk about good and evil, and what man lived for. We used to call him Socrates.

June 25.

Rain. Night and day it pours down like a warm waterfall. The whole world is wet through. Our camp is set up under a gray tarpaulin with holes in it, and above it there's an ocean of warm water. Our rain back home is like a fine mist from a spray gun. I'll be a month in this cosy little place. Being an old experienced hand, I'm supposed to teach the native recruits to use Tommy guns and various other simple ways of destroying themselves and their countrymen. But they know it's a risky business. They're just waiting for us to give them guns, then they'll bump us off and go into the jungle. We—the whites, that is—sit in the bars all day; but they are confined to barracks where the roofs leak like sieves.

To keep up our fighting spirit, the same old story is broadcasted every day about punishment for disobeying orders, deserting, stealing weapons, instigating a rebellion and other military

crimes. The death penalty covers any misdemeanor, and at the close of the broadcast a long list of those executed is read out.

Again to keep up our fighting spirit, public executions take place every Thursday, right in camp. They don't waste time over it—nobody wants to get wet. The soldiers press their backs against the barrack walls and the officers stand under a special canopy. The machine-gun bursts twist your very guts—and what was once a man a second before falls into a ditch of water. That cesspool with its brown, murky water really gets on your nerves....

July 6.

I've been two weeks on this tiny lump of coral sand. Live in a rather nice house in the middle of a sparse growth of palm trees. What am I saying? It's a palace. I never lived in such a house before. Used to see them from the outside walking the streets, or else in the movies. I've been simply drunk all these days with the feeling of owning all this, forgetting the price I pay for it. But never mind. It's right what Major Pearson told me.

"What have you got to lose? Life? Health? Money? You lost all that long ago, in the jungles. You're a living corpse, killed a thousand times over. Just agree, and in three years you'll be rich and famous. You can marry anybody. All you have to do first is live three years in solitude, but you'll be living the life of an English lord. You're lucky. Darned lucky. And you know why? All because we, culpable and inculpable machines that we are, discovered you are an ideal fellow to carry out orders with no questions asked. Here, you won't have to think, or even won-

der about anything. Just wait for orders. If war breaks out, you carry them out. But maybe there won't be a war for the next twenty years. And if there is, you couldn't find a safer place to be in.... You won't be in mortal danger here, like you were in the jungle. Just three years on the island, then a pile of dough and a ranch in California."

How did I manage to remember all that publicity rot fabricated for people fed up with the whole lot of crap they call life! I never had a good memory, can't even recall the serial number of my Tommy gun. Yet I remember all this junk and can recite it like I used to recite verses I memorized for Granny's birthday when I was a kid.

So here I am, the perfect ideal for executing the decisions of others, sitting in my bungalow with my feet up on the table watching TV, looking at a bunch of people executing their own ideas by getting ready to blow up the White House.

July 10.

This morning I was up on the carpet before Major Pearson. "You've been scribbling something down with a pencil. What you write is your business. Only remember—it all stays here! Memorize it, if you want, so you can tell it to your grandsons. Though what can you write about this post, anyway? But to take it out—no soap. Regulations!"

Pearson's our senior officer. Not a bad guy, either. And he's been in the jungle, too. I can see that by the way he stares. I guess I've got the same lost look of a murderer. Altogether, there are twenty-one of us here, including the main-

tenance guys for the base and power station. But there're only two of us from the jungle. August 20.

Yesterday, Jim Tarber told me in a whisper what the yellow button was for. That Tarber is a simple-minded guy. From the first day, everybody knew what it was for. But how did he guess? "Tell me what the red button's for!" I asked him. And honestly, that's worth thinking about. But they pay us not to think....

"What is the yellow button for?" asked Petya Samoilov. "Did you see it down there?"

"I even pushed it," said Kostya.

"He's joking," I reassured Petya and Khi, who went pale. "The button is under a cap, and you can't get at it without a key...."

"There are two buttons," broke in Kostya. "We found one key. I brought it along. Here it is! The other button was pushed long ago, and nothing happened."

We began examining the key.

"It's a good thing we have it," said Khi.

"That's why I took it."

Petya got up and, not uttering a word, we all ran from the house as fast as Kostya and I had from the underground. We raced for the lagoon, breaking through bushes, passing the rusty robots, followed by the shrill screams of the parrots.

Petya Samoilov circled the atoll once, and hovered at an altitude of 3000 metres. The *Ko-lymaga* needed repairs, so Petya and Khi had flown here in a large helicopter with a compartment for dolphins. An organic glass wall separated us from Proteus and Tavi. They floated

motionless in the clear water, watching us with curiosity.

Petya Samoilov was in the pilot's seat, and the rest of us sat by the windows looking down at the blue spot surrounded by a circle of foaming surf. Kostya turned away.

"I have the feeling that this robot-inhabited island is ready to fly up in the air at any moment."

"A fine mess we'll be in if it explodes now," said Petya. "Don't forget there's an atomic power station down there, besides a big charge of explosives. But now, it won't blow unless one of the robots pushes the red button."

Petya changed the angle of the propeller vanes and the white strip below slowly slid away from us. Soon the gleaming atoll was lost in the white breakers, and our mood grew more cheerful.

Kostya picked up a glass jar he had brought from the jet-boat. The *Mustang* was left for good in the round lagoon. About ten spiders were crawling about in the jar.

"Aunt Lia will go crazy over this one with the red stripes," said Kostya.

"Certainly it is an interesting specimen," admitted Petya.

Khi, lost in thought, suddenly looked at us and shook his head as if confused.

"Awful! What's interesting about it?"

"You mean the one with the stripes?" asked Kostya, surprised.

"Oh! You mean the spider.... I was thinking of something else. See, it was people like that fellow who murdered my ancestors long, long ago. What a terrible, but unhappy man!"

THE ESSENCE OF LIFE

The Supernova had not yet unveiled its mysterious face. But Biata wasn't right in saying that people on earth were complacently living a carefree life, refusing to face the approaching danger and blind to the gravity of the situation. In reality, the threat of the Supernova had caused all matters of daily routine to be put aside. Scientists all over the world had joined forces to solve the one problem—to decide how dangerous the radiation was, and to search for means of defence against it. Man's experience acquired in the past now came in handy, experience accumulated by the peoples of the earth during the time when there was no peace in the world and when radioactive fallout from nuclear bomb tests contaminated the atmosphere, water and soil. Medicinal drugs to prevent mutation and malignant degeneration of human and animal cells were being produced on a mass scale. And shelters built. They were swiftly evacuating children from the northern hemisphere where the Supernova radiation was especially intense. A deep-sea fleet was being built at top speed.

There was no despondency. Mankind, as a united force, was engaged in repelling the assault from outer space.

For the past few days I had followed the latest news telecasts with interest. The incident with Black Jack had thrown us a century back in time, so that Kostya and I almost forgot what age we lived in.

And now, Pavel Mefodevich sat beside me, also watching the screen with clear concern. When "Star Topic" was over and the "Archaeolo-

gical Journal" programme came on, he turned to face me.

"We've been so busy with domestic affairs that we've forgotten Mother Earth is surrounded by a desert inhabited by genii. From time to time, they remain sitting in their corked bottles, but now one of them is on the loose, his breath is upon us, and soon he'll appear in all his glory."

The cool night air and the eternal song of the waves poured through the windows. From the far end of the room came the click of billiard balls and Kostya's resounding voice: he was winning and giving sarcastic advice to his opponent. Kao Khi was improvising on the piano. Touching the keys in a soft legato, he was composing an accompaniment to the rhythmic voice of the ocean, weaving into its texture the minor tones of his native land. Chauri Singh and Jean Lagrange were playing chess. Pavel Mefodevich, Petya and I were sitting in bamboo chairs before a wall-to-wall picture window, and flying spray from the ocean trickled down the convex pane.

A robot brought iced mineral water for Pavel Mefodevich and cocktails for Petya and me. Then Kostya came over, breathing hard.

"So this is where you've settled down. Not at all bad. Wonderful breeze here. Say, what are you having? I see you've got cocktails or something." He picked up my glass with a wink, tasted it, and smacked his lips. "Darned if it isn't a cocktail!" Then he flopped down on the chair beside me and began talking billiards.

"I won. Three games running. The third was a draw. And somebody told me Nilssen was a real wizard!"

The Academician listened to Kostya with a smile.

"Billiards is the game of kings," he said. "If I'm not mistaken, during the reign of Louis XIV, you had to get special permission from the king to play it. The game was a privilege reserved for aristocrats."

I could only see his profile, but again it seemed to me as ancient as parchment, something like Louis XIV himself would look like if he were still alive. He hadn't touched his mineral water and offered it to Kostya who, with a nod of thanks, drained the contents of the tall tumbler of diamond glass.

His skin, I thought to myself, reminds me of the plastic material used for preserving biological preparations. And what kind of gadget works inside him? How his hand shakes!

"I told you," Kostya whispered. "Look, he's switched off."

Pavel Mefodevich sat with closed eyes and drooping head.

"Let's leave," whispered Kostya. "He's hardly had any sleep the last few days because of his sea primates." Our chairs creaked when we rose to slip away. The Academician opened his eyes and raised his head.

"As you were!" he commanded. "Sit down again. I've had a wee nap and, you know, I saw a very interesting dream. But a sad one. About those who have all passed on. D'you remember the photo you saw at my home, the one taken of the captain of the spaceship *Comrade*? And all its crew? The captain was Jeremiah Varnov, artist and poet; the astronavigator was Vasily Dubov who collected bird songs. When we were

really in the dumps suffering from space depression, he would play his tapes and our blues melted away like magic. Then there was Nikolai Savchenko, co-pilot, who was fond of saying 'When I return to Poltava....' And then the Bystritsky brothers. Boris was the cybernetics engineer and Arkady was our linguist. His student thesis laid the foundation for all space linguistics, and he was the one who found the key to the language of sea primates. The ship's doctor was Antosha Pilyavin. Naturally, these names mean nothing to you. Mostly, we remember only the first and the last pioneers who blazed the trails of space exploration.... Since those days, thousands have made journeys into the cosmos."

He spoke abruptly, in short bursts, explaining nothing, skipping from one episode to another, as if in a circle of people who caught his meaning without need of the spoken word. But gradually his story became more connected. The names that we knew nothing of took on flesh and blood.

"Nobody, except historians, remembers our *Comrade* today. Since then, several spaceships have borne the same name. But we took part in one of the first mass expeditions into space. Five ships were launched to explore a corner of the universe—within the orbital limits of Mars. But our mission was to cross the boundary and approach the belt of asteroids. Nothing to it now, of course. But then! It took two years to build the ships and train the crews. That was a time of unprecedented progress. Mankind was at last free of the threat of war. All industrial enterprises devoted their output to satisfy the people's demands. It took about 500,000 scien-

tists and engineers to make the flight possible. All secret inventions buried in private safes became public property. Problems that were incredibly difficult and far beyond the power of a single country to solve were easily overcome. Making decisions on a planetary scale no longer demanded long and drawn-out summit talks. Forgive me for mentioning facts known to every schoolboy but, somehow, I feel strangely excited." He slipped his hand under his jacket over his heart, and frowned. "We were all lovers of adventure, romanticists, and lived only for outer space. Probably, people experienced the same feeling during the centuries of great geographic explorations on Earth. The time of man's childhood, of enlightenment. The time when the world was expanding beyond belief, and the earth became round instead of flat. You have all gone on excursions into space, and felt proud of belonging to the human race. You have seen the earth from the void of heaven and felt for this small blue globe all the tender affection one has for aging parents. It's different when you have to stay months in space. And I mean precisely 'stay', because the view from the scanners doesn't change. There is only a black emptiness and the eternal stars. In spite of that, we held out. A strict regime, discipline, work and, above all, friendship—all relieved the boredom of the endless cosmic day with its black sky and shining stars or, if you prefer to call it, the endless cosmic night. All conceptions change up there. Especially beyond the orbit of Mars. The sun is duller up there, a bit brighter than the moon, and Earth turns into a blue star.

"You can find thousands of reports on similar

flights. Some are filled with thrilling pages: tales of overcoming a breakdown, or going through a shower of meteorites—terrible, by the way, only in reports—also encounters with comets and asteroids. Often, a grain of truth is enlarged and polished by the hand of an artist. But they are not lies, just as there is no lie in science-fiction stories. Nature is far more ingenious, and everything written either happened or is happening in one of the many galaxies. Except mystical nonsense, naturally.

“The tapes of the *Comrade's* log are preserved in the archives of the Museum of Astronautics. But you wouldn't find anything interesting in them. Only voices. The real live voices of my friends. They give the coordinates with respect to stationary stars, the amount of fuel left, food, water, oxygen, the intensity of radiation and dozens of other reports made according to the planned instructions. Only one tape, the very last and the briefest, deviates from standard reports. It contains the perfect plot for a novel.

“I remember every word: ‘The whole crew is ill. The disease struck suddenly. A streptococcal infection. Reasons unestablished. We are taking measures.’

“After a 48-hour interval comes the captain's last words: ‘Dr. Anton Pilyavin made a heart operation on Pavel Polikarpov. Operation was successful, but Anton died suddenly.’ Not another word is in that official document.

“There are, of course, private diary tapes, but they are mostly of an intimate nature. Yes, and a few messages were sent concerning course deviation and the existence of a magnetic field

of tremendous strength. We were all dying of a streptococcal infection!”

Kostya jumped up.

“Impossible! Even in those days, they had excellent antibiotics. And, as far as I know, most diseases were conquered or under control.”

“That is all very true. We no longer knew the diseases which once wiped out millions of people. Then, as now, there lived in our blood ‘domesticated’—if you can use the term—bacteria, in symbiosis with the blood cells. They behave themselves, but bide their time. We were all in good shape until the *Comrade* was caught in a powerful magnetic field. It suppressed the defensive properties of our organisms, and the enemy had a clear field, ‘ran amuck’ as they used to say. Their hour had come. We had antibiotics and lots of medicine, but they were ineffective. True, the streptococci gave way to some extent, but not before they affected our hearts. It was then that Anton operated on me. Why was I the first? It was the captain’s decision. I was the youngest, just 26 years old. The captain was thirty and the rest were also older than I. They were all to be operated on, but Anton managed to implant an artificial heart only in me.”

“What about the others?” asked Kostya. “Wasn’t anabiosis—a state of hybernation—used? Weren’t they saved, after all?”

“Yes, but during the one-year return trip, the streptococci weakened their hearts and poisoned the blood.”

“But you? What about you? Were you the only one to come through?”

“Anton had put me to sleep first—anabiosis. When I awoke, we were on Earth.”

"Then who directed the ship? The dead captain? He fed the trajectory tape into the cyber-pilot?"

"Yes. Boris and the captain calculated the shortest trajectory home before making a last attempt to save their lives. And today I saw them in my dream—healthy, laughing. We were sitting in the woods, listening to birds' songs...."

Kostya went over to him.

"I owe you an apology, Pavel Mefodevich...."

"Never mind, my boy, there's no need. I understand."

"No, you must forgive me. I thought you were a robot, or cyborg. Even sitting here, just a while ago, when you were telling us all this."

"I guessed that, but I couldn't figure out why you thought so. Old people sometimes get mixed up in putting two and two together. But how do I resemble a robot? After all, I'm not bad-looking; my face is fair-skinned with still a few roses left on my cheeks." There was a shrewd gleam in his eyes.

"It was that ticking sound I heard, even then, on the *Albatross*."

"Ah, so that's it! I'm as used to it as I am to the ticking of the spring chronometer hanging in my study. It never occurred to me. There's nothing to do but put up with it. They did offer to change my heart for a new one, more up-to-date and noiseless. But I'm used to this one. Have to change the valves once in ten years. As for the rest of it, it's holding out fine. The heart of my friends. I'll probably keep it till I die. Well now, that's enough of sad memories. My friends didn't care for such things. Why did I tell you all this? Because of the dream? Partly. Several

times I was on the point of telling you, but something always interfered. The last time was when Miss Charming spoiled a memorable evening. So now you know everything. The veil of mystery has been lifted from the enigma of my person. I wanted to relieve your doubts. And I thought the story would prove interesting and useful. People are not only in need of pleasure. There's too much of it, nowadays. However, that little Star up there has partly spoiled man's carefree happiness."

He stood up, and added: "By the way, there's another reason, too. We've just been informed of an outbreak of 'flu'. A grave form. The radiation of that aggravating Supernova can cause a lot of trouble. The Health Centre should be informed without delay. Returning to my tale, it's been weighing me down for some time, but I didn't realize it was precisely that. Thank heaven, I had this dream, like those in an old myth...." He quickly left the salon without a glance at us.

Kostya's eyes gleamed.

"How do you like that? How old must he be? Wait a minute, when was the first expedition? It was 96 years ago!" Suddenly Kostya rounded on me. "A fine one you are! You knew, or guessed, that I was talking rubbish. But you didn't say a word! What a position you put me in! And before such a wonderful person! I'll never forgive myself, or you, either."

We went out on the balcony. The salon was on the lee side, and high above us in a compressed stream the trade-winds went tearing by with a piercing whistle. The sky was cloudy with the odd star gleaming through the occasional open-

ing. Down below, we saw the phosphorescent outlines of six dolphins noiselessly slipping across the lagoon. The night patrol.

"I like his suggestion," said Petya, "that there's nothing we can think of doing on earth, that hasn't already been done somewhere on one of those innumerable planets up there." Petya pointed at the sky. "And also his saying that we mustn't forget the price paid for each step into the unknown, including that heart they gave him." He stared down at the sparkling water, lost in thought, and added: "Did any of you notice that Matilda looked a bit under the weather today? She seemed sad, with a sort of concentrated look on her face."

I told Petya that I hadn't yet learned to recognize a whale's mental state by its facial expression.

"There's nothing easier, and wipe off that sarcastic smile," answered Petya. "Take a good look into Matilda's eyes some time. They were sort of mournful today. I noticed it right away. And so did Khi."

"Maybe she's worried about the baby?"

"You mean all those rumours about the Giant Squid? Nonsense! He's not a bit terrifying. And he's not fool enough to tangle with the whales. The simple fact is, they graze over the very route the Squid takes on his way to the Sixth Aquatoria, where there is smaller prey. Sometimes, he even drops in on the whale sharks." With a farewell "See you tomorrow", Petya started away and then stopped. "Oh, I almost forgot, we've got our work cut out for us tomorrow. After the milking, we start vaccinating. I received the ampoules by the Post Jet-Boat, only this even-

ing. And I've got something else on my mind, too. Couldn't we think up some kind of pleasant surprise for our old man?"

Tense and silent, Kostya murmured that he had some work to do in the lab, and took himself off. Petya followed his example.

Alone, I began strolling along the lighted pathways and the broad alley with its rustling arch of leaves. In my mind I talked with Biata about my teacher's tragic experience. It seemed we were both amazed at the low scientific level of those times. Death from streptococci—what could be more stupid! How could they have organized such a flight without considering all possible eventualities! The computer technology they had in those days made it possible to almost guarantee complete safety. How thoughtlessly they had expended the lives of such wonderful people! Had the goal been worth it? And what is the goal of mankind, if there is any? I stopped abruptly, imagining the look Biata would have given me. Whenever we talked on this theme, she always passionately claimed that there was a goal, a purpose to life. Incidentally, she had never believed that there were an endless number of worlds inhabited by intelligent beings. She thought that life was an exceptional thing, a rare occurrence. Maybe, she would say, the Earth is the only centre of life in our galaxy. No, she would have said, those brave people didn't die in vain. They were pioneers, the vanguard of mankind, searching for a passage into the universe.

Suddenly I found myself near the railing by the waterfront, and saw the tall figure of Pavel

Mefodevich, hardly discernible among the night shadows. He stood staring into the darkness.

"Is that you?" he asked. "Can't you sleep?"

"Afraid not. It's such a beautiful night...."

"Just a night like any other. It was my story that made you so restless, and you all split up. It made me feel melancholy, too. In moments like this, I turn for help to the ancients. And I remembered the words of the poet Mousset: 'When the soul realizes it has grown old, it discovers the true meaning of all things.' No matter what you say, that's a lovely piece of consolation. There's only one thing wrong with it, it isn't true. On the contrary, the longer you live the more you realize how deeply hidden such things are. And it's even harder to realize that you're getting old and it's time you retired and let others take over. But now, I think I'm beginning to. But is it time I retired? I suppose it is, because I keep wanting to return to the past. You know, it's fifty years since I told anybody that story. Yet it's only human nature to want to share your thoughts about old times. A man belongs to his past and it isn't easy for him to get used to living in a different age. The essence of an epoch, as in music, is in its tonality and rhythm—and all that is innate to a man from birth. I think it will go hard with young astronauts when they find themselves on alien civilized planets. Don't you think so?"

I told him Biata's ideas about Earth being the only centre of life.

"That's not new. All religious teachings were of the same opinion, and even genuine scientists shared it. But that is due to ignorance. Because it's hard to believe that somewhere, other than

on Earth, two individuals are standing side by side and philosophizing just as we are now. When you get such thoughts, then you gaze up at the sky. You yourself once shared the wise conclusion that the manifestations of intellect on our planet are infinite, but now you deny its existence out there. Just look at the Milky Way, made up of thousands of millions of suns! How many planets revolve around them? And beyond? No, I've, in the 'murmur of the stars', as one poet put it, we shall soon hear the 'voice of a brother searching for us'. This will happen soon, very soon now." He laughed. "I just spoke to the Head Doctor. I think I got him out of bed. I gave him a brief outline of our case. And, you know, he really surprised me. 'Thanks,' he said, 'but your case has already been described in detail in all medical textbooks.' It was rather embarrassing.... Now then, how are your sea-lilies coming along? Let's go and take a look at them. Mother nature presents us with enigmas," he remarked as we quickly walked towards the centre of the island. "We have enough to solve as it is, and there are more to come. And that, my boy, is what I call the very essence of life."

JACK'S LUCK RUNS OUT

On the circular scanner at the Central Post, the waves rose and fell. Flying fish with quivering pearly wings streaked diagonally across. The ocean tipped down to reveal the whole surface right to the horizon that seemed sprinkled with golden pollen. Somewhere in that vast stretch

of water, Black Jack was dying. Luck had turned against him. While hunting the golden mackerel off the shores of the Keeling Islands, Jack and a few of the K-whales had been so absorbed they got lost in the labyrinth of coral reefs. Most were killed during ebb tide, left high and dry between slabs of coral. Only a few wounded K-whales, headed by Jack, had got out of the trap.

A detachment of dolphins moved past. Our eyes were blinded by the bright spray in the dimly lit room. The dolphins maintained a wedge-shaped formation. They clearly meant business, determined to find Black Jack. Above them in the blue firmament hung a mini-helicopter, transmitting info on everything taking place under the keel of the *Kallmar*. The mini-helicopter lay on the same course as the dolphins, and overtook them. Slowly surging towards us on the scanner came a blue white-capped roller. Of a sudden, the water was hidden by the dipping wings of many sea-birds: frigates, gulls and albatrosses. The familiar picture of a funeral escort. For a fraction of a second, the cloud of birds dispersed and we caught the gleam of water reddened with blood. Sharks were tearing to pieces the body of a dying K-whale.

The wings of the gulls hid the terrible sight. The mini-copter flew past: nothing could be done. And we recalled poor Attila. The swarm of birds thinned out. With ominous cries, the gulls flew eastward, following the course of the dolphins and the mini-copter. A band of sharks tore in the same direction. Now a second victim appeared, trailing a rosy wake. The sharks formed a semi-circle around the wounded K-whale,

as yet fearing to close in. One shark darted in from the side, but the grampus turned like lightning, and the shark stopped short as if paralysed. Not touching the attacker, the K-whale swung full circle, and the shark pack scattered in all directions. The grampus continued its way. The sharks followed, but maintained a greater distance than before.

By now, almost all the islanders had gathered at the Central Post. Pavel Mefodevich leaned back in the duty officer's chair, the rest of us stood and shared impressions in hushed whispers.

The wounded K-whale and its pursuers vanished below the lower edge of the scanner. Towards us again moved the glassy surface of the sea, sparkling with diamond facets of sunlight. Above the water sailed the frigate birds on wide majestic wings. As if moulded of bronze, the sharks flashed through the sunlit waters. Their numbers grew continuously, and all raced in the same direction.

"I'm beginning to feel sorry for the K-whales," said Kostya loudly.

Pavel Mefodevich glanced at him and nodded approval.

"I fully share your feelings; they are admirable, but not always helpful. The K-whales are now in a more difficult position than the dolphins were when we couldn't understand each other. Making contact with grampuses is a more complicated business, and the nature of the grampus is also more complicated. In offering them our friendship, the approach must be made carefully. We must somehow convince them that it is they who need us. I'm afraid that so far we ha-

ven't won their respect. You see, they are the real rulers of the seas. I might even say they are passionate nationalists. But despite everything, I feel deep sympathy for them, and even respect. The way I see it, Jack is something like a noble highwayman, and it is even possible that his tribe look upon him as their leader in a struggle for independence. Yes, indeed, a remarkable tribe! Did you notice how that wounded K-whale made use of all its battery of defensive means? The sharks were swept away as if with a broom."

"A broom? What in the world's a broom?" asked Kostya. "Is it a special K-whale organ that emits ultrasonic or supersonic waves, or will-power impulses?"

Pavel Mefodevich buried his face in his hands, his shoulders shaking. He was laughing.

Kostya retreated into a hurt silence, for now a group of K-whales appeared on the scanner screen. They were swimming very slowly, forming a ring around three of their tribe: two smaller K-whales were supporting a giant grampus whose back was dark, almost black. He was not less than nine metres long—and we all recognized Black Jack.

The mini-copter reduced its speed to that of the K-whales and, dropping lower, relayed an image to the Post showing a close-up of Jack and his brother-orderlies. Without their support, he would have gone to the bottom. We could see terrible wounds in his sides and belly; his left fin hung lifeless. We were struck by the expression in his eyes—not a sign of fear, nor of submission to fate. They shone with the will to live and were full of proud courage.

"Jack's position doesn't look very hopeful," said Kostya.

Nobody answered him. The "brother-orderlies" were relieved by two others, and the former joined the ring. The new "pair" deftly and carefully caught hold of the wounded Jack. They tried to avoid grazing their Chief's wounds: they swam in rhythmic unison and very slowly for creatures accustomed to great speed.

The mini-copter's pilot made a report to the captain of the *Kallmar*.

"The K-whales are making five to six miles an hour. In thirty minutes they will be near the atolls and probably they'll go in one of the lagoons. Perhaps they've decided to treat their chief's wounds there. The *Kallmar* cannot enter a single lagoon—the entrance channels are too shallow, with sharp turns. At any rate, it would be very risky."

"What do you suggest?"

"Stopping them until you arrive."

"But the sharks!"

"In ten minutes the dolphins will be here."

"As soon as they arrive, drop the ampoules."

"Will do."

"Does Jack seem very bad?"

"Yes, but he's holding out like a good one. Apart from wounds and the patent blunder made over the reefs, he is still chief of the tribe. He is obeyed without question. At this moment he is sending three K-whales to chase away the sharks. See how many of those devils there are! They're gathering here from all over."

"There's plenty of them, all right. But you should take extreme measures only in dire necessity."

"I get it. We must preserve nature's biological balance...."

They talked a few minutes longer, but their words were drowned out by the screams of the newly arrived seagulls.

The K-whales behaved very strangely when dolphins, armed with electric spears, burst through the line of sharks. Though the whales usually considered their dolphin brothers as lawful game, this time they paid no attention to them. They simply formed a wall around Jack, and stubbornly moved towards the islands. The dolphins, drawing up their ranks in attack formation, started for the sharks. The enemy's main group broke, scattered, some diving into the deep seas; only tiger sharks could now be seen manoeuvring around the K-whales. The everlasting hunger of these fish overpowered all other instincts: the smell of blood chained them to the spot. And they paid for it. The dolphins, with warlike whistles, organized their favourite hunt. They had cultivated their hatred for sharks for millions of years. And this time, the dolphins didn't ram or use their electric spears, they simply deafened them with supersonic waves. And the sharks, paralysed, turned over and hung belly up like fishing floats.

"Look, there's Proteus!" cried Kostya, recognizing his pal.

I tried to find Tavi among the darting, streamlined bodies; but in vain, though I would have known him among thousands of his brothers.

When he saw that the sharks had been put out of action, the pilot of the mini-copter aimed his optical device at the K-whales.

Round pea-sized ampoules fell like hail and

dissolved momentarily, turning the water green. In the centre of this huge emerald field, the K-whales slackened speed and moved listlessly until they fell asleep. The foolish, impudent gulls, with deafening cries, were already fighting over the game high in the air. With all his strength, Black Jack fought off the overwhelming desire to sleep. He rested his one sound fin on the back of his companion who, though sleepy, still retained a glimmer of consciousness....

On another channel, the telecyber received the image of the familiar plankton fields where the blue whales were feeding. Matilda looked at us from the screen with her tiny eyes and opened her jaws in a smile, revealing a wonderful set of metre-long bristles.

While the *Kallmar* was towing in an inflatable barge filled with unconscious K-whales, all the students here on field work—that is, Kostya and I, Petya and Khi—as well as Corrington, Lagrange, Nilssen and Chauri Singh, worked like beavers to prepare suitable premises for our expected guests. In the lagoon there is a small inlet where the yachts and jet-boats anchor. It has a basalt bottom, its only exit is a narrow passage into the lagoon. The worst storm scarcely ever ripples the still waters here. Before the capture of Black Jack, none of us knew that this tiny inlet had been blueprinted by the island's designers for an oceanarium, mostly for dolphins. At that time, there were some scientists who still held the reactionary view that dolphins could, at the very most, be turned into domestic animals and put to the same practical uses as, for example, the dog.

In thousands of oceanariums, the sea primates

had lived a tedious life, without any idea of what was required of them by the two-legged creatures with long clumsy fins.

As a rule, any appearance of progressive phenomena met opposition from people who were incapable of, or unwilling to, overcome their preconceived views. We know from history the price mankind paid for such ignorance.

However, in this case, everything went smoothly. While the supporters of "shut-in maintenance" for dolphins went ahead building their oceanarium-enclosures, progressive scientists comprised a dictionary of dolphin language, studied the psychology of sea primates and invented the first device for translating dolphin speech into Russian and English, and vice versa.

There was no need for an oceanarium on our floating island. The dolphins settled in the lagoon like our brothers by intellect, helping man, like true friends and assistants, to study the fantastically rich and varied life of the seas. And the "enclosure" intended for them was turned into a yacht basin.

To prepare the premises for K-whales, the only requirement was to barricade the entrance to the inlet with a strong grille or netting of stainless steel. A few openings had to be drilled into the basalt to hold brackets for the netting. The island was well equipped with tools, and the netting was ready by the time the *Kallmar* arrived.

In the "sanatorium" sector for dolphins, there was not one bath large enough for Black Jack. We had to immediately build a small basin right beside the mooring wall and above it a small pavilion equipped with surgical equipment.

Our two doctors—boyish, silver-haired Mark Katz, and his wife Nora, tall and stately, commanding in manner but soft-voiced—never left Jack's side, awaiting the arrival of surgeons who were flying in from Sevastopol, Tokyo and San Francisco. They landed at night, quickly donned sterile overalls and caps—all thirteen of them—and entered the basin. After a short consultation, the operation was begun. Twenty-six surgical nurses assisted: some entered the basin, and those left ashore stood by the tables with surgical instruments, dressings and drugs.

Kostya and I lay flat on the roof of the pavilion, watching the operating theatre through the ventilation openings. But when Kostya's unsterilized beret fell down and grazed one of the surgeon's hands, we surreptitiously slipped away and went for a walk along the lagoon shore to talk things over. In the out-door theatre over the water, a film was on which had been taken by dolphin-cameramen during a recent joint expedition to the Red Sea. Pavel Mefodevich was glued to the cyber-translator in the hydrophone lab, watching the scanner-screen and gravely listening to the running commentary. The small lab had noiseless air-conditioning units, and it was pleasant to breathe the cooled air. On seeing us, the teacher nodded towards some chairs, and for ten minutes we viewed the coastal landscape along the Red Sea. But very few underwater shots had been made.

"Everyone knows," said the announcer, "that seawater with its high salt content is unfit for drinking. People drink so-called fresh water with a minute admixture of other salts. On the

shore, you can see a gigantic factory where salt is extracted from seawater."

The dolphins behaved no different from people who watch newsreels beamed from the Moon, Mars or Venus. They had all been born in the lagoon or near the island, and had seen only the flat shores of the atolls. So the views of the Red Sea coast were so strange to them, they were filled with wonder and surprise. Palpable sensations of burning heat and the odour of a dead desert came from the deserted sandy beaches and naked cliffs. There was no water on the coast of that sea, and therefore no life. And waves of breathless amazement swept across the lagoon when the image showed a city of marble whiteness, filled with parks and gardens.

I can remember but a few phrases I overheard in the lagoon from the audience.

"Those are stones," a mother told her son or daughter, as the city appeared. "They grow without water, and people live in them."

"Like parrot fish in the reefs?"

"Yes. Now, be quiet. Just look, and don't bother the others...."

From the crest of a wave, the cameraman had shot a view of a beach crowded with thousands of people.

From all over the lagoon, the voices of dolphins broke through the hydrophone.

"How slowly they swim!"

"I always feel that I should help them."

"I wouldn't change skins with them for anything...."

"Do you hear that?" smiled Pavel Mefodevich. "There is a mutual penetration in each other's mental sphere. I admit the process is slightly

retarded due to the difference in perception of the same things. The dolphins are now living through a period of unbelievable mental upheaval. I would compare this period to the age of great geographical exploration, once experienced by our people whom the marine folks describe as the creatures that live on "sand-bars" or "shoals". During that age of exploration, we suddenly became aware of the tremendous vastnesses of dry land and ocean, and we Europeans saw the native peoples of America, Australia and Oceania. And I assure you, for Christopher Columbus, Magellan and James Cook, these peoples were just as puzzling and incomprehensible as the primates of the sea are to us in many respects. Just as we are to them. Believe me, when we finally see the beings of other solar systems, when we can travel to the planets of Sirius more than four light years away, then the surprises we shall meet will not be so great, for we have become used to such things on our own Earth." He fell into deep silence, which he finally broke.

"How are things going with your Iron Hand, your Jack?"

"They're stitching him together," I answered.

"Why do you say 'Iron Hand'?" asked Kostya.

"In my time, it was the nickname of a famous boxer. I recalled it through the associations we often apply to words. That boxer, why all the boys worshipped him. He looked like a god. But fame ruined him, the way it ruined many great people in olden times. Something the same has happened to Jack. If he'd behaved a bit more modestly, not tried to show what a genius he is—he wouldn't be in this nice little pool."

"But then he would have died of his wounds!" cried Kostya. "You saw how ripped and torn he was."

"Bad wounds, I admit. But the inner organs, apparently, suffered no harm. Two weeks of hospital regime, and Jack will be on his 'feet' again, in some kind of quiet retreat where he can live a free and happy life. But right now, I'm rather worried about him.... Let's wait and see... we'll see...."

Pavel Mefodevich rose and we all left the cool premises of the lab. The dolphins were whistling and blowing to show how they liked the film, and listening attentively to the commentator's voice now inaudible to us because the sonic frequencies were beyond human hearing.

Glancing at the lagoon, our teacher went to the oceanarium, and began to listen. All the K-whales hung motionless, facing the grilled barrier. The water was brightly lit by bulbs mounted like footlights along the bottom close to the netting, a useful precaution in case the prisoners tried to escape. With this in mind, we had also built the netting rather high above the surface. The K-whales floated at different levels, gently swaying, scarcely moving their fins. Now and then, one of them would surface with a whistle, fill his lungs with air, and again sink into the water.

"They are listening to the commentator on the sound-track of the lagoon's film-screen," said Pavel Mefodevich. "It's not likely they'll understand him: their language differs from that of the dolphins, though the phonetic construction bears a resemblance. It's possible that the K-whales are alarmed by the presence of the dol-

phins, whom they consider their lawful game. Cannibalism! Not too surprising, if you remember that it was once practised by the 'people living on sand-bars'—and not so long ago, either."

"I wonder how they'll react when they hear the first word ever spoken by man in their own language?" remarked Kostya, thoughtfully.

"About the same as we would, I suppose, if a squid or an octopus suddenly started talking to us. The intellect, on the lower levels of evolution, is inclined to be conservative. One could find many examples from the history of mankind where bigotry and conservative views have held back progress for many centuries. I recently received a few deciphered words of the grampus-language. For two years now, in Murmansk, scientists have been working on a dictionary."

"Can you recall any words?" asked Kostya, giving me a nudge.

"One or two... To our ears, their language is more like hissing and whistling. Their speed of info exchange is astounding. Indeed, it is even superior to that of the sea primates. However strange it may seem at first, grampuses are also sea primates, only their world outlook and morals are much more limited. However, we'll find out a lot more when a cyber-translator arrives. We've been promised one. But for now...." He went over to the hydrophone and gave a thin, rippling tremulous whistle and snapped his fingers.

In the wink of an eye, the K-whales darted away from the net into the shadows.

"I never imagined I was so gifted," said Pavel Mefodevich, so pleased with his success that a

shade of boastfulness crept into his voice. "Mind you, I spent only five minutes practising that. As a matter of fact, it's the effect of the environment, so don't you laugh at me. It really is true that many thousands of years ago the 'people of the sand-bars' and those of the seas were in close contact with each other. A special common language existed. They understood each other by using whistling sounds. This language is now extinct but, not so long ago, many of the peoples living in coastal regions or on islands used whistling as a means of speech, or else retained it as a rudiment equal in value to their normal everyday speech. I have a tape in this language which was once used in a Turkish village on the Black Sea coast. I ran the tape for Kharrita. She listened with interest and said that she didn't understand many words, but it was very ancient language of sea primates. What about that!"

The K-whales returned to the barrier.

Pavel Mefodevich repeated the alarm signal, but this time the K-whales didn't even stir.

"Well, what d'you say to that? They certainly catch on fast. They checked the premises by their sonars, found no signs of danger, and concluded somebody had played a trick on them. Look! Now they're glancing my way. If only we could hear what they're saying at this moment. They're probably ripping me to pieces with their remarks—they don't like such silly jokes in the seas. A life can be lost over a false alarm. It seems to me that your Jack hit the reefs because he found himself in a similar situation. The *Kallmar's* crew had been pressing him hard for over a week. The whole tribe were

tired, tormented, nervous. Jack led them into a very safe shelter among the reefs: its great depth and narrow entrance guaranteed security from their pursuers. Then came an alarm signal. Their only way of escape was through the reefs. The younger and smaller ones were able to make it. But the waves threw Jack and a few of the older grampuses upon sharp out-croppings of coral growths. Believe me, it's no fun being old. Though any age has certain advantages. And if you are game enough to use them, life can be always sweet. The main thing is to have a goal. And the less chance there is to achieve it, the more interesting life becomes. One should also have an ideal to follow, an ideal example of uncompromising and lofty aspiration! Mine has always been Tsiolkovsky. You've seen him in art galleries at school, but maybe you didn't pay particular attention to him."

"How can you say that! We know all about him. He lived in Kaluga, and was terribly unlucky at first."

"Unlucky! My dear boy! He was a school teacher, and taught physics. And he was as deaf as Beethoven. And just as poverty-stricken. You don't know what poverty is. He was dependent upon limited, ignorant and stupid people. They thought he was a freak. There was not even complete understanding between his own family and him. He was absolutely alone, as if he lived in a desert.... No, it would be more correct to say 'in outer space'. And he worked like one possessed for his descendants, including the descendants of those who ignored him or treated him with indifference. He paved the way to the stars. An extraordinary human being!" He mop-

ped his forehead. "But what are we standing here for, puzzling the heads of both the dolphins and K-whales! The hydrophone's been on all this time! Imagine what a strange impression they must be under. Especially after listening to the muddled explanations of my wandering remarks translated by the cyber! Well, what are we waiting for?" He laughed, and told us to follow him.

DAY OF CAPITAL REPAIRS

It was the "Day of Capital Repairs". This was a regular affair occurring on the sixteenth of each month. All the islanders, except those on duty, were taken off the daily routine to put their "personal" sector in good working order. The cast basalt was incredibly durable. It would probably take at least a hundred years for the island to experience any serious changes. So far, the sun and water and wind have hardly affected it. At times, after a storm, the waves break off the insulation sheathing along the waterfront, and heavy rain washes away some of the soil from our gardens and plantations. The winds, humidity and salt water continually destroy the anti-corrosive coating of the decorated towers. Each one of us is responsible for the preservation of the island, and usually carries out some maintenance repairs almost every day. Even so, every month there is an accumulation of odd jobs, especially in sections ordinarily concealed from the eye. And, of course, the assignment given Kostya and I concerned one of those cosy little corners on the island.

Previously I mentioned the enormously thick mooring cables which hold the island at anchor. The job given us by the Island Council was to check these cables, clean them and see that they were intact.

I can't imagine what could happen to them. Each of these flexible cables is a metre and a half in diameter, and it seemed to me that even one should be enough to hold the island in place. And there were ten of them! Kostya agreed with me—a rare occurrence, I must say. He even complained about the job to Pavel Mefodevich, saying that it was irrational to waste our creative abilities like that.

"Once a year, even a poker makes a good weapon," observed our teacher.

"A poker? I think I've read about such a device before, or am I wrong?" Kostya wrinkled up his forehead.

"A pretty old device, used for stirring up the coal and wood in stoves."

"Oh, so that's it? Now I remember. I'm sure I've read about the instrument somewhere," answered Kostya. "And if it shoots, then...."

"Precisely, so don't waste your time and energy over nothing, and 'down you go, boys, to the bottom'."

"Is that also an aphorism?" asked Kostya.

"It's the culmination point of a funny joke. When your work is over in the lagoon, drop in and Miss Charming will tell you all about it. She, incidentally, knows thousands of them. Not long ago she was asking me where those two young chaps got to, the ones who had a special urge to break rules and make trouble for everybody. Some joker, eh?"

An eternal gloom always reigned under the rocky bottom of the island, where the temperature never rose above 15 degrees Centigrade. This was pretty cold after the 25-degree temperature on the surface, and we had to wear warm, electrically heated diving suits. Though our hands were like ice, because it was difficult to work in gloves.

We followed instructions: first we examined the cable fastenings joining them to the mooring anchor. The anchor itself looked like a gigantic hemisphere, and was also made of the same cast basalt. Neither the anchor nor the fastenings were visible through the thickly growing seaweed and colonies of various forms of marine life. Despite the great depth, life swarmed on the bottom: small glades were covered with vividly colourful molluscs, sea-worms; fantastic crabs climbed up the fronds of seaweed, and living flowers such as the glowing sea-anemones opening their treacherous stamen-tentacles.

"Do we have to destroy all this bit of loveliness?" asked Kostya, sadly.

"It won't be much of a loss: as soon as we leave, they'll settle down again in the same place," I replied.

"It's easy for you to say, but you try returning to the same place after being chucked out with this thing!" In front of my nose, he slowly raised a vibrator, something like a shovel but wider and heavier. I had one, too.

"We're nothing but barbarians," continued Kostya. "Just take a look at that hermit crab. The one beside those actinoid zoophytes. Think of the energy the crab has expended to crawl up of such a height. He certainly had some reason.

“Hunting food. Instinct....”

“What a nasty word—instinct! It doesn’t mean a thing. Mefodevich says the term is only used when a phenomenon is inexplicable due to lack of knowledge. Maybe the crab had a reason we don’t know about, and you call it instinct.”

Sometimes, I find it hard to figure out whether Kostya’s joking or not. At present, his face was invisible behind the mask. His voice came through my earphones with a shade of mournfulness, retaining the note of sentimentality that had bugged Kostya all morning. He was “sweet-and-sour”, today. But I didn’t bother finding out why. Kostya never could keep anything to himself very long. And the more patient and insensitive I was to his “suffering”, the quicker he would come out with it.

Wondering what was up with him, I kept cleaning away the underwater jungle with the vibrator. It took us twenty minutes to get rid of the millions of creatures which had settled down around the anchor ring.

“Don’t get under my feet all the time,” said Kostya sourly.

I quickly swam away from the anchor towards the “mower”. This was a brilliantly designed mowing-machine, specially meant for cleaning and repairing the cables. We had been briefed earlier on it, using a miniature model in the technological lab. Settling down on the seat, I waited while Kostya checked the cable and anchor with an ultrasound defectoscope. Above me circled a school of tiny fish attracted by the bubbles issuing from our air regulators. Near them in the water hovered a large ocean-perch, looking like a highly experienced pedagogue ob-

serving playful tiny tots. His lips seemed to wrinkle in an ironic smile. Hardly stirring a fin, the perch slowly glided towards them and suddenly, like lightning, hurled himself upon the small fry. They flashed out of the way. In some incredible way, the perch outguessed their manoeuvres, burst into their midst, passed through, and vanished without slowing down into the green twilight. As if nothing had occurred, the tiny fish continued their interrupted play. Apparently, those who remained alive were not at all bothered by the tragic end of those who had died in the jaws of the treacherous perch. In the ocean, death is such a natural thing that it is scarcely noticed by those who do not fall victim to others as food.

"Finished.... And all for nothing," Kostya's voice came through the earphones. "Bring your machine over. Not one crack in the anchor, and the cables are good for another two hundred years. In places, though, the molluscs have pierced the insulation. Penelope could have done the job, not to speak of Miss Charming. If you don't mind, I'll take the seat."

Kostya occupied almost all of the seat and I was kindly permitted to perch on the very edge.

"You see, I'll be driving," said Kostya, by way of excuse. "You're just an assistant."

The mower slowly moved vertically up the cable, its knives and brushes droning away.

"We're like bronco-busters," he went on. "Remember the mustang?"

Of course, I remembered. The mustang was like a real one: it bucked and twisted and screamed when you pushed the button on the left side of its neck. Except that it would come to

a sudden stop if the batteries wore out, and throw off its rider. This happened fairly often. The mustang worked from early morning till late at night, but its batteries weren't noted for long life.

Tavi, Proteus and Khokh swam up.

"What are you doing that for?" asked Tavi.

I tried to explain why we had to clean the cables, but got mixed up, realizing that any damage could have easily been located by using the defectoscope.

"The cables look more attractive when they aren't covered up with seaweed and crawfish," I tapped out on his back.

"You're wrong," Proteus interrupted. "The round 'seaweeds' are beginning to look like sea snakes."

"Dead snakes," added Khokh.

They circled round us for a few minutes. All the time, the ultrasound indicator in my helmet softly purred in my ear: the dolphins were talking to each other.

"I wonder what they were talking about," said Kostya after they swam away. "Probably, they continued to express surprise over our terrific thirst for action, at times absolutely pointless the way they look at things. In this case, I can't help but agree with...." Kostya cut off his words because the mower stopped when it struck an obstacle it couldn't cope with, and we flew out of the saddle and began slowly sinking to the bottom.

Returning to the mower, we found the insulation had been heavily damaged and a few cable wires broken. It took us about an hour to weld them and restore the insulation.

The ultrasound indicator hummed in our helmets, singing out one weirdly alarming note, interrupted by short intervals.

"What a musician!" cried Kostya. "The voice sounds like that of an average-sized whale. Probably a cachalot. Some of them wander round the island, hunting cuttle-fish."

"No, it's a dolphin," I contradicted.

"Doesn't sound like it. The tonality is different."

I didn't bother arguing: Kostya had a wonderful ear. Sure enough, about fifteen metres away, a K-whale suddenly rushed past us. It was being chased by a detachment of dolphins, in open order and armed with electric-spears.

Tavi swam up, the picture of alarm. He halted for some ten seconds, just long enough to tell us what had happened. He put all the details and circumstances into Morse, sending at twenty signs a second, and dashed off to overtake his mates.

"I got almost all of it," said Kostya. "He could have signalled even faster. So that is what's up! While we've been mowing seaweed and doing countless harm to everything here alive, up there," he pointed to the surface "the rest of Jack's gang are making an attempt to free their chief. Brave fellows, I must say!"

The underwater acoustic telephone rang.

"Alert! All hands surface!"

By the time we got up and took off our diving suits, almost all the islanders had gathered at the oceanarium. At first, we didn't understand why the alert had been given. The K-whales were acting perfectly normal: frisking in the blue water. On taking a closer look, however, I

noticed that their movements were in complete harmony, as if they were training for something. They swam fast in a wide circle, keeping close to the basin wall. In front swam Black Jack; he was perfectly fit with not a trace left of his terrible wounds. He was followed by all his retinue. Jack made a sharp turn and stopped in the centre of the basin.... The other K-whales continued their impetuous race, increasing speed. One grampus, probably in answer to his chief's signal, went to the end of the pool, turned, and hurled himself towards the net barrier. Racing a hundred metres, he dived. Then we could see him, smothered in silver bubbles, come up from the depths and, splashing, rise in a steep arch. Breaking surface with a crash and whistling sound, he flew some fifteen metres over the water and dived underwater.

The K-whales continued their crazy circling, with Black Jack motionless in the centre.

"Tremendous!" cried Corrington, "Bravo! Hey, why don't you do the same?" he called to the other K-whales. Then he noticed Kostya and me. "Did you see one of Jack's adjutants down at the bottom?"

"I guess so. Just a minute ago. We thought he was a scout," answered Kostya.

"Certainly not, he's one of Jack's guards. The rest will also start leaping the barrier any second now. What a sight it will be!"

Nikolos the Greek stood next to Corrington.

"I wouldn't be so happy about it, if I were you," he remarked, gloomily. "You can't imagine what will happen if they burst out of here. We've had enough trouble over them. And now

the whole dolphin colony here is in mortal danger."

"Oh! If that ever happened! I'd give anything to see a real fight between dolphins and K-whales. The dolphins are prepared. I've seen their guard detachment, armed to the teeth, and all ready for battle." Corrington fell silent, looked around absently, felt all his pockets and dashed away from the oceanarium.

"Such a serious fellow, an established scientist, but...." Nikolos shrugged his shoulders, regretfully. "And now he's gone for his movie-camera. He should be given a good lesson sometimes, for his behaviour."

Another K-whale made a long jump.

"What are they jumping for?" asked Kostya. "Are they just training? Then why did Jack let the first one escape?"

Pavel Mefodevich gave him the answer.

"I think he sent one out for reinforcements, realizing that there are no outposts. We just received a report from the leader of the dolphin detachment, to the effect that they weren't able to catch him. The leader complained that the electric-spears slowed them down in deep water. And the K-whales are as fast as the devil!"

"Why didn't they all escape at the same time?" asked Kostya.

"Take a good look at the net barrier. It can be crossed by only one at a time. The whole operation will take about two minutes. That gives the dolphins sufficient time to block off all exits from the lagoon, and things would go badly with the K-whales. Now their warchief is carrying out manoeuvres. Apparently, they're seeking the best variant of surmounting the bar-

rier in the shortest time possible. So ... the first one got away? He might gather the K-whales in force and attack the lagoon. Such a heroic attempt would result in heavy losses. To tell the truth, I'm beginning to have great doubts as to whether our approach to these intelligent creatures is the right one. Actually, we are the aggressors. We took over their territory, and now are trying to force them to make contact with us."

"And the dolphins?" asked Kostya. "If we hadn't tried to make contact with them then, as far as we're concerned, they would still be simply animals."

"You are much mistaken. The sea primates have been seeking contacts with us for thousands of years. At times, they managed to do so, when people were also ready to meet them half way. But afterwards, owing to many reasons, cooperation would collapse. And the short memories of our forefathers preserved only legends, traditions, and tales of the friendship between man and dolphin."

Meanwhile, the robot-loaders had pulled up a roll of heavy steel netting and laid it beside the exit from the oceanarium. Light assembly-cranes arrived. Petya Samoilov drove one, and Khi the other. The cranes were set up on opposite sides of the exit, then the robots unrolled the netting across planking from shore to shore. The crane-operators lifted it and hung it above the barrier. Now, all that remained was to fasten it with metal bars.

"Come on!" cried Kostya. "You and I are old hands at this, though I'd give a lot not to do it.... Look!"

The K-whales were raging mad. They kept rising to the surface, aggressively lifting their fins that resembled triangular sails. Corrington stood right on the barrier, his camera clicking away.

"How stupid can you get!" howled Nikolos. "You could fall in, and then...."

We never heard what Corrington answered, because the steel bars were raised along the netting.

Khi passed me a magnetic hammer, using the tip of the second boom, and I set to work. The netting was welded to the bars with a few light taps of the hammer. From below came the splashing and typical bursts of air from the excited K-whales. Again they were making a great circle, Jack in the centre turning this way and that. He is looking at me alone, I thought. And his look boded no good. I clung tighter to the netting, and made sure my safety belt hook was fastened properly.

"Ive! Hang on tight!" yelled Kostya. "I think they're beginning a real attack. Look! The first one's starting his run. Are you belted to the netting?"

Well, I was, but Kostya had forgotten to. The netting bulged and twanged under the blow of a three-ton giant. I was torn from the netting and hung by the belt around my waist. Kostya had trusted to his hands, and he was catapulted into the oceanarium. I saw how deftly he balanced his body in the air and, describing a smooth arc, cut water right before the nose of a K-whale flying up to storm the barrier. The grampus flashed over him, and I saw Kostya go down in a deep dive. Then I was shaken worse than

ever—the weight of the new attacker was probably greater than that of the previous one. Came blow after blow. I lost sight of Kostya, for I swung like a crazy pendulum back and forth on the belt. From different positions, I caught glimpses of odd scenes, like fragments of an ancient cine-film; the islanders running along the shoreline, the gleaming bodies of K-whales leaping from the water, with clenched jaws and bloodshot eyes. Corrington was still shooting film—from the crane boom.

“How did he get up there at a time like this?” I asked myself.

The grampuses were determined to break down the upper section of netting. But they had begun a shade too late, giving us the chance to weld it to the bars in several places. Now the tall spring-like wall shot the K-whales back into the oceanarium. Everything went dark before my eyes when the net, pulled back under a hammering blow, jerked me out with all the power of a Roman catapult, but the belt held. Even so, I didn't forget about Kostya and screamed to those ashore to throw in paralysing ampoules. Later, I was told that nobody heard me: they were all too involved with the K-whales and saving Kostya, but they said I had held out wonderfully and didn't even drop the hammer.

They knew what had to be done, and soon I was hanging quietly on the netting like a ripe mango, vaguely listening to Corrington's voice.

“Okay. You can come down now!”

He spoke as if I was specially posing, or hanging there for his benefit alone. He personally was set up pretty comfortably in the netting held

by the end of the boom. He smiled and winked at me, patting his camera.

"What shots!" he called, with a thumbs-up gesture.

I threw a quick glance at the oceanarium.

The K-whales either swam apathetically on the surface or hung motionless facing the walls. I searched among them for Kostya, though by all rights they should have swallowed him long ago, unless a miracle happened and he had reached shore. But he wasn't to be seen. I was shocked at the indifference of the islanders who had returned to their former work on the netting. And I was indignant at the smug, satisfied look on Corrington's face—at least, that's how it struck me. Petya lowered him to the ground, where he laughed at the gloomy Nikolos and clapped him on the back. I was roused from my state of nervous shock by Kostya's voice.

"Hey, how do you feel?" he asked, climbing up the other side of the netting as if I, and not he, had been miraculously saved from the teeth of the enraged K-whales.

"A bit shaken up. And you?"

"I lost my hammer. Have to finish the welding with yours. Do your side and then join me."

Perching on the last step of the narrow ramp, he began whistling. And again, he didn't fasten his safety belt. In the simple melody you could feel the exultant, joyous pulse of life. I listened happily, and all my tiredness gradually melted away. Kostya couldn't keep his stormy feelings to himself very long. He clambered over to me, grabbed the magnetic hammer and set to work, keeping up a rapid-fire conversation.

"I know how frightened you were when I fell,

and the rest, too. Actually, though, I wasn't in any danger. The K-whales had no time to bother about me, that is, as long as I didn't get in their way. So that's what I did. In the middle of my dive, I already had the situation well in hand."

"Your dive was a beauty!"

"It was pretty good, wasn't it?"

"Very. First class."

"The dive didn't matter so much. The point was what to do when I hit water. Have you any idea where I got out?"

"Over there, up the ladder...."

"I knew it! Logically, I should have swum to the wall and crossed the 'devil's wheel' right in the path of the K-whales. In that case, I'm afraid you'd be finishing this work by yourself. When I struck water, I dived right to the bottom, and headed back for the barrier, then I went along it...." He burst out laughing.

And I laughed, too, as if I'd heard the funniest joke of my life.

When we finished welding the netting and had returned to the shore, Kostya stared at the exhausted K-whales.

"All the same, we played them a dirty trick. Nobody gave us the right to do it."

That afternoon, we dived under the island again to finish our job and for about half an hour we rode the "mower", cleaning the cables. Then we spent two hours in the lab, and after supper went for a swim with the dolphins outside the lagoon. Kostya and Proteus kept away from me, talking something over. On the way back, Kostya was down in the dumps.

"Strange as it may seem, Proteus holds reac-

tionary views. He says it's nicer to see 'killers' locked in a pool than free in the ocean. Proteus likes to explain things by way of aphorisms."

"You're referring to the grampuses?"

"Yes. I wanted to know Proteus' views on liberty and the right of one species to oppress another. And, as you see, like many of us, even he can't get it through his head that..."

"... that it's better to be eaten up than to deprive the flash-eaters of the chance to eat you."

"You're pretty sharp today, aren't you?"

Kostya was long silent and swam alone without using Proteus' back, though the dolphin kept offering his help and couldn't understand why Kostya refused it with even a shade of hostility. Dolphins never argue with each other, and respect the opinions of others. It never occurred to Proteus that Kostya was angry with him because of their differences over the K-whales.

I laid my arms across the backs of both dolphins and told them not to hurry, at any rate not to lose sight of Kostya, who was an excellent swimmer, but we were four miles away from the island and occasionally hit a zone of stinging jellyfish. Red and purple, they looked like lanterns designed by a talented artist.

We swam slowly, Kostya leading, the rest of us a hundred metres behind. Tavi and Proteus couldn't stand such a turtle-like pace, and they moved in zigzags a little off course. Naturally, I mean land tortoises; because turtles move so fast when they hunt fish that it is difficult to follow them.

I tried to explain Kostya's behaviour to Proteus and Tavi. "He's in a bad mood. People

often get that way, when things go wrong, or there's trouble... well, when you want one thing, and get another...."

"I don't understand," said Proteus. "Ko has strange ideas. That's what happens when there's danger everywhere: the black depths below, killers all round, and the roaring fire falling from above."

"Night and thunder?" I asked.

"Perhaps, even in daytime. When everybody expects disaster."

"But so far no disaster has struck?"

"Not yet. But, if what Ko has in mind happens, there may be disaster. And he's thinking about it."

"Kostya?"

"Yes, Ko."

I didn't understand a thing. What disaster could suddenly hit Kostya? Of course, he could run into jellyfish. But, he'd only get a few small burns.... We were recently vaccinated against their poisonous stings, and there wouldn't be any serious consequences.

"Let's catch up with Kostya," I suggested. "His moods change fast."

Kostya gave us a smile of apology.

"If I had to swim alone another half an hour, I'd have to blow up the air bladder. I know it's my own fault, but that makes it even more difficult. Proteus, I'm sorry I was so rude, old fellow. I acted like a barracuda or a moray eel. Lend me your back a minute... that's it. Somehow, I feel tired today, though I've hardly done a thing."

"What?" And I started listing all the things we had done that day.

"That's nothing. My nerves have simply given out. Maybe I've had a bit too much solar radiation. Or is it the Supernova?"

"Possibly. You and I are made of the same material as..."

"... as all other organisms. Thanks. But I feel different today, somehow. Not at all like anybody else. Maybe, it really is radiation from that invisible Star?"

When the powerful waves swept us up on a crest, we could see as far as the island: the wind turbines, green parkland, the decorated conning and lighthouse towers melting into the early twilight. Only the revolving golden disc at the top of the lighthouse burst into blinding light as it reflected the rays of the sun.

Proteus and Tavi swam rather slowly, feeling that Kostya's strength was not yet restored though he did his best not to show it. Proteus supported him.

"When I was swimming alone and began to feel tired, an interesting idea hit me," he said. He was silent a moment, then grinned and tossed the wet hair from his eyes. "I got to thinking about the importance of man's cooperation with other forms of life. Man would die without their help. And man isn't always the one to initiate cooperation. We don't really know how man acquired his true friends like dogs, horses, cattle, camels or cats. We do know that dolphins were the first to search for contacts with man, and in the dawn of history they used to meet people with open hearts and understanding souls. In those times, man was closer to nature and considered himself the brother of everything alive. Many generations of people found the delicate

threads that connected them with other creatures. Then catastrophes occurred—wars, epidemics, earthquakes, coastal settlements washed away by floods, supernovas exploding, fireballs falling. And that's not half that happened in man's long history. So the ties of friendship between man and his brothers by blood were broken...."

The dolphins guided us to the right, saying that at various depths ahead the way was barred by stinging jellyfish which were poisonous even for dolphins.

"There, you see?" continued Kostya. "What would we do now, without them? And they, incidentally, could manage all right without us."

I was used to Kostya's habit of letting his thoughts skitter from one thing to another. Everything he had said was far from new, but I felt from his tone and hidden excitement that he was anxious to say something he considered very important, so I listened without interrupting. Besides, the conversation relieved the monotony of our swim back to the island.

Kostya looked at me ironically.

"By the look on your face and that pasted-on condescending smile," he told me loftily, "I can see you don't know what I'm driving at, and why this long preamble."

"Maybe..."

"You don't have to answer in words. It's written all over your unsophisticated face. But have a little patience and it will all be as clear as the air after a spring rain. Now then! The original cooperation between man's rapport with other species on different intellectual levels used to be broken or destroyed, rather, not only

by cataclysms. Man himself made the break, trampling on the former friendship because of his egoism! Philosophers, priests, scientists and even poets justified man's vile conduct, and in all ways praised his exceptional position in the world. Man is the crowning achievement of nature. Everything is for him. He is permitted to do anything. All creatures must serve him, give him their meat, skin, feathers, wool...."

"And milk," I chipped in.

"Don't interrupt! Milk is a product for exchange. And now for the main thing! Man is very guilty before his brothers by blood. He has always been aware of this. At any rate, many people realized it. And even in barbaric times, they sought to understand and draw other creatures closer to them. I want to say that one of the chief goals of our existence is Great Humanism. The uniting of all reasoning life. And don't smile!"

"Salt got in my eyes."

"I know your tricks—salt indeed! Now then, you're always butting in. But this time you won't get me off the track. I'm coming to the end. We live in better times. Many prejudices are forgotten. This is the age of cooperative life. Friendly cooperation. Not the cosmic or scientific age, but precisely that of friendly cooperation. How much has been achieved by specialists in bionics through using ready-made models created by nature over billions of years! How much the dolphins have given us! And what a lot they've received from us! Next in line come the squids and the octopuses with their specific power of vision. To continue. We have achieved a lot, and as always during a period of success or, as

students put it, of luck, we forget that our intellect is far from being perfect. What we have achieved becomes a standard or criterion, heavy as a rocky cliff! It's difficult to move ahead carrying such a heavy load. Our teacher says that the discovery of laws is awfully difficult, but it's even harder to overcome them, to correct or reject them altogether. Well, that's about all. We're almost home. Forward, Proteus! Catch me up!"

"I guess you didn't understand a darn thing from my incoherent speech?" he asked, when we climbed ashore.

"What makes you think that? Much of it was quite interesting."

"I'm not talking about my elocutionary style. So, tell me, do you agree to help? 'I need you like anything!'"

"But, of course!" I cried joyfully, because for many years we hadn't used that magic expression.

"Then come along to the cafeteria. We need to take on a load of fuel. What I have in mind calls for plenty of energy."

He led me past the oceanarium, making a pretty long detour. The K-whales hung motionless, lifeless, in the blue waters, not even looking at the tuna fish swimming right past them.

"See?" emphasized Kostya. "That's what I was talking about. Whether one species has the right to oppress another. They'll die here no later than tomorrow. They'll all die. They can make their hearts stop beating. Look!"

And it was true. On the bottom you could see the white belly of a dead grampus.

Kostya noticed how greedily I looked at the choice of food in the refrigerated counters.

"I recommend that you limit yourself to a glass of Matilda's milk, and some kind of juice. We have to do some more trekking around in the water...."

Without wanting it very much, I drank the thick warm milk as if it were medicine, but drained a glassful of pineapple juice with enjoyment.

"As far as calories are concerned, you can't beat it..." began Kostya but, meeting my glance, broke off. "D'you think I don't want to eat? I'm ready to chew sharkskin. Okay, come on. We'll be back soon, and then.... Phooey, what slops! The juice, though.... A drink fit for the gods!"

We were only ten when we swore to always go to each other for help. With no questions asked. We only had to say "I need you like anything!" That was all. This magic expression put one of us at the complete disposal of the other. The strange thing was that never yet had such a demand-request come unexpectedly. I suppose we learned to read each other's minds, guessing what was in the wind. If Kostya burst into my room during the summer hols, then I always knew, in general outline, the route and aim of our campaign or trip. My guileless friend for several days had already been putting me on the alert by his mysterious silences. So I was always prepared for anything.

Now, too, I guessed the mad venture he had in mind, and suddenly I was caught in a whirlpool of alarm when I pictured the probable results.

"You've thought it over carefully?" I asked.

"Yes."

"You're sure they'll leave the lagoon peacefully?"

"Like Matilda and her friends after the milking."

"When did you make a peace pact with them?"

"Wipe off that snooty smile. I've foreseen everything. Proteus will head a detachment of spear-armed dolphins. They'll bar the way into the lagoon. The K-whales are still under the influence of the soporific. You saw how absolutely inert they are."

"You think Jack will quietly dive under the island?"

"I do. Like the first one who escaped. They have the route thoroughly worked out. I'm positive. Everything will be okay!" he ended, in a far from reassuring tone.

We walked a little way silently. The short sunset died out. The discs of the artificial moons began warming up. Through the beat of the waves flew a crystal tinkling, like the ringing of bells on a New Year's tree. A few days before we had been sent several hundred singing cicadas, evolved by Japanese selectionists. Their unusually soft voices rang out in different tones. Hard to imagine that these sweet-voiced creatures were bred from those moon-eyed insects, their forefathers, who up to this day torture one's ears with their deafeningly shrill concertoes. Though many people are fond of their metallic drone....

"What about the Council? How will they look at it?"

"Well, you see.... I've already talked it over with Nilseen."

"And?"

"Look, I've," said Kostya, coming to a halt. "I'll free you from your... your oath. Maybe you're right. Good night." He turned sharply and ran towards the lagoon.

What could I do but run after him! I ran, and aching thought: Now I'll put on a mask, take a laser, jump in the lagoon and open the gate for the K-whales. Then I'll stand before the censorious eyes of the Council. Tomorrow, probably, they'll "beach us for good" on the mainland. Without finishing our field work, leaving it half done, we'll fly back for a new assignment and again face a Council, this time at the university. Teachers will be summoned from all over the world. How angry they'll feel at being diverted from their researches because of two undisciplined and sentimental students!

Thinking along these lines, I felt that Kostya was in the right, all the same. This was a higher truth, which always goes contrary to established rules and laws and which, in the final count, would be admitted by all and become law.

The lab on the shores of the oceanarium shone like a Japanese lantern. The architects had made a perfect copy of this ancient form of illumination. Kostya was already in the "lamplight". With happy eyes, he stood looking at Pavel Mefodevich who was sitting in a chair by the hydrophone. From the device burst crackling sounds.

"So you've come, too," said our teacher. "Sit down, and listen with all ears. Not everyone has the chance to listen to anything like this." His voice rang triumphantly, not at all harmonizing with the crackling which suddenly changed into a howl that pierced the ears.

"What's that?" said Kostya, suspiciously. "An amateur concert, or is Jack having a business conference with his retinue?"

"D'you like it?"

"It's ghastly."

Pavel Mefodevich turned down the sound volume.

"For the human ear, especially if untrained, it's hard to take. It hasn't exactly the usual form of emotional effect. Besides, you have to remember the imperfections of the device, which only gives a rough scheme of the language of primates. If we could receive in the ultrasonic range, and knew the language into the bargain, the impression would be much stronger. Now, however, we can only realize the tragedy being enacted out there." Pavel Mefodevich rose and quickly pointed to the wall and down below. "One of them, maybe your Jack, is singing his swan song, his last song before death."

"They sang it once before," said Kostya. "I gave you the tape. Remember, when Jack wanted to destroy our jet-boat? Was that ever a race!"

"Don't mix up two quite different conceptions. That was the 'Death Song'—a war song threatening death to their enemy. This one is completely different. It is a song of farewell to life, when there is no way out. The rulers of the ocean cannot submit to imprisonment, even if it is temporary.... The appeal made by the Pacific Ocean Grampuses made a bad impression on them. Their relatives shared experiences with them, as they used to say in the past. They explained how useful coexistence, and even friendship, could be with those inhabiting, for the most

part, dry land. But our K-whales refused outright to make any compromise. A proud people!"

The quiet drone now coming over the hydrophone was reduced to broken bursts. Pavel Mefodevich turned up the output amplifier. The "lantern" began vibrating from a heart-piercing wail, which came to a sudden stop.

Kostya gave Pavel Mefodevich a bitter, censorious glance.

"That's all!" he said in a whisper. "Jack's dead! And I'll never forgive myself for letting him die."

"Nor me?" added the teacher. "You warned me and the Council. Right?"

"Yes!"

"And you were right. Absolutely right. Never forgive an injustice done to any creature alive, even one standing on the lowest rung of the ladder of life."

"You're contradicting yourself!" Kostya's eyes flashed. "That's ... that's..."

"... mean and despicable!" completed the teacher, smiling. "But I managed to talk the Council into it, and I am taking the personal responsibility on myself to save your Jack."

"But it's already too...."

"He is all right! Your friends have already tossed a new medicine into the basin. It's a preparation that acts specially as a depressant on the aggressive centres of whales. And here comes one of the straight-jacket brigade who took care of the warlike instincts of the prisoners."

Petya Samoilov stood at the door, all in smiles. He turned on all the spotlights around the ocea-

narium, turning the whole basin into a transparent cup. The K-whales moved sleepily along the very surface. But some lay on the bottom without a sign of life.

"Now we'll lift them up and send them to the bottom of the lagoon," said Petya. "Then Khi will drive up in the ambulance for the sick ones and we'll take them out to sea."

"While we went for a bit to eat, four died," remarked Kostya.

"Six," Petya corrected him. "Two are lying in the far corner. Another hour and a half, and they would all be dead."

"Did you hear their swansong?" asked Kostya.

"Yes. But only with half an ear. Khi and I had no time for it. And there's our Black Jack! Hello, old fellow!"

The K-whale chief looked very effective in the emerald-green water. Moving lazily, he grazed the rough wall and drew away, raising his one-and-a-half-metre dorsal fin above the surface.

"The new drug acts on the mental activity in a very special way," Petya explained. "See that? Jack encountered a school of tuna fish and practically turned up his nose at them. Not even a glance. The drug gives them the feeling of being sated. It can even call forth a disgust for food, and inhibits the centres of aggression. Now, for the first time in Jack's life, he's in a warm-hearted, if not a meditative mood. He thinks he will perpetually be in a state of Nirvana, surrounded by green water...."

Pavel Mefodevich joined us.

"What if we try to change their ways, keeping them longer under the influence of this stuff?"

"Kardashev, the inventor of the drug, writes

that something like that is possible, but only with young creatures. Habits are too conservative. How I'd like to know what that fellow with the big tail is thinking! And, naturally, he's not in a state of Nirvana. Oh no! In all probability, he is analysing the reasons for his run of bad luck over the last few days, and thinking of a way out of this 'green heaven'."

The ambulance-boat was slowly approaching the netting. It was a powerful jet-boat with a compartment for transporting whales. The ambulance was surrounded by a large detachment of armed dolphins. Everybody except Kostya headed for the gate. Suddenly we heard a loud splash behind us. Kostya had dived in the basin and was swimming towards Jack. Pavel Mefodevich gave a hushed gasp, and stopped us with a sharp gesture. It was certainly useless to ask Kostya to return. And raising a fuss might call forth some unforeseen reaction from the whales.

"He's mad!" whispered Petya.

"How long do I have to wait?" Khi called through the megaphone. "Open the gates..." and broke off when he saw Kostya in the pool.

Kostya swam up to Jack and touched his side. Jack did not react to this familiarity.

"Come back!" Petya lost control of himself.

"Quiet!" said Pavel Mefodevich softly, raising a warning finger. "Don't make a sound. The minute that lunatic comes back, we'll give him something to remember."

But the lunatic didn't think of returning. He climbed on Jack's back, sat up and finally stood, holding on to the dorsal fin. A shiver ran through Jack's body, but he remained still. Kostya began hurriedly attaching something to Jack's fin.

"Look at that!" growled Pavel Mefodevich. "He's got a head on him, not a half bad idea."

Such a tremor shook Jack that small waves came rippling from his sides. Then we all gave a chorus of "Ah's" as Kostya, taking a running jump of four metres, sailed up and, arching in the air, jack-knifed into the water. Surfacing, he swam away with his beautiful crawl. Jack remained motionless, it seemed his last ounce of strength had been expended.

"Kostya's a wonder", muttered the teacher. "He learned nothing from riding a whiskered blue whale! He has to prance around on a toothy one!" He didn't take his eye off Kostya, and suddenly yelled: "Keep right! You're only a foot or so from the wall."

It was almost four in the morning before we finished transporting the last load of whales forty miles from the island, set them free and headed home. The ambulance jet-boat crawled: the radar was out of order, and our course lay right through the whale pasture. The whales were asleep. Our headlight beam frequently picked out their shiny massive bodies. Wakened by the bright ray, the whales awoke and blinked their tiny eyes in confusion, swinging round to avoid the light. They moved so slowly, sleepily, that before they completed a half turn the jet-boat slipped past, and with heavy sighs they sank again into a sound sleep.

We were all tired out. Petya Samoilov slept, stretched out on the long, narrow seat. Kostya dozed beside Khi who, humming under his breath, drove the boat. I talked with Tavi over the hydrophone to while away the time. Tavi

was swimming somewhere alongside. He told me none of his friends approved of our letting the "killers" go free. I kept trying to explain to him the motives of our highly humane conduct.

"That's only for three-deckers with skins of stone."

By this he meant that only such huge molluscs with incredibly hard shells, as well as man moving in "iron shells", could permit themselves such foolishness.

Without realizing it, I began to doze off and awoke only when I was thrown off the seat. Our driver had also fallen asleep and, despite alert signals from the dolphins, bumped into one of the whales.

BATTLE OF TITANS

Vera dropped in on us several times, using the hydroplane that made regular stops at the island. Sometimes for an hour or two, occasionally for a whole day. And always when no excitement was going on.

"I'm awfully unlucky," she said. "I wasn't here even when Attila died. As soon as I leave, you have either a crab invasion or a cuttle-fish approach, or else Black Jack is after you. You get stuck on an island inhabited by rats and robots. And all this whenever I'm not here. Soon I'll simply move in and wait for the next adventure."

Vera made friends with the botanist Berta Fuller, and spent most of her time in the latter's laboratory. Berta was married to Nikolos

the Greek and differed from her husband by having a very excitable nature.

One day as we passed her lab, she called us in with an air of mystery.

"Boys," she burst out excitedly, "Vera.... Quiet, she's over there by the orchids. What I wanted to tell you was—she found a mistake in my research work. An awful mistake! One that could have made me a laughing stock. It would have put me in a terrible position with my colleagues. It turned out that my ... (and she gave the long Latin name for an alga that lived in symbiosis with a strange species of orchid) was discovered over a year ago! See what happens when you live away from centres of science and have no time to look through information bulletins! I always thought Vera wasn't a serious scientist—flighty, you know. So you can imagine my horror and surprise. But how glad I am she told me. Another thing, it looks as if Mokimoto is not only a good scientist but a remarkable pedagogue," she concluded, hearing Vera's quick steps approaching.

Holding a scalpel, Vera ran towards us and, to Berta's terror, brushed against the branches of a bush bearing gauze-capped flowers.

"You rush about like a cyclone," Berta chided, checking the gauze caps maternally.

The last time Vera went away, she had told us that she was torn in two between our island and Mokimoto's dendrarium where her poor "saurians" awaited her. Soon she intended spending a whole week on our island. Mokimoto had promised to let her off.

"Vera san," he had told her. "You always return with good ideas from the island."

"By that he meant the action of sound oscillation upon the saurians," explained Vera. "This method has long been known, but for some reason we've not used it as a stimulator. And here in Berta's lab there's a very original device. With her agreement, I copied the diagram."

"You know what," said Kostya. "You bring along a hundred of those saurians over here. They'll start running around fast on this island. Maybe the magneto-telepathic waves of the Giant Squid—still a puzzle for science—will have an effect upon them."

Poor Kostya. His heart was also torn in two.

The next day when Matilda was being milked, Kostya and I were busy with the cosmetic operation. Kostya was doing her back and "face", and I was working below the waterline. Owing to our zeal, her skin had become smooth and clean, and there were only small solitary colonies of acorn barnacles. While working, Tavi and I were silently talking. Our telepathic signals were quite simple.

"Tavi, what's that on your left?"

"Two sucking fishes."

"Big ones?"

"Well, you could swallow them."

Naturally, Tavi was referring to his own capacity, but maybe he thought that even I, in some way or other, could have swallowed the sucking fishes. After all, I swallowed snails and oysters.

I called him by mental telepathy, and he came at once, ready to help out. Sometimes Tavi couldn't keep from transferring to his usual speed of thought transmission.

I was tired, and suggested we change over to

Morse code. Tavi eagerly agreed. I had learned to receive a great many signs a second, which was pretty fast, and Tavi was glad of the chance to share the local news.

The dolphins' father (our teacher) had left with a large reconnaissance detachment of dolphins to search for a new tribe of sea primates. Rumours of such a tribe have long been making the rounds. Krak killed another white shark. The Big Killer (Black Jack) is hunting in the vicinity of the nearby islands. (Tavi made it clear that in the lagoon they didn't approve of the release of Black Jack). "In the lagoon today, a film will be shown about life in an underwater town," he said.

After surfacing for air, he quickly returned and said that a new woman had appeared on the shore, that she looked like Vera but wasn't.

"Is she pretty?"

"She's very harmonious."

Tavi had his own ideas on beauty. The face played no part, only the figure, from the viewpoint of shape and proportion.

Many times I've heard him use the word "harmonious" in regard to jellyfish or sea anemones that looked particularly effective on a coral branch, or to the lighthouse topped with the golden disc of the radar set, and to our island from the crest of a wave. I always agreed with Tavi in his judgement of what was beautiful. After seeing Vera in the water and on shore, Tavi wasn't moved at first by aesthetic feelings. Later, I discovered he didn't like her bathing suit, which was a lilac shade. Tavi didn't like the colour. When she appeared in a different one, Tavi changed his opinion.

"She's very harmonious," Tavi repeated, breaking into my thoughts.

So far, Tavi had never given any woman such high marks, especially at first sight. Even so, I continued to scrape off the acorn barnacles. Tavi, full of curiosity, surfaced again and returned to report.

"The harmonious woman and Ko are swimming down. Here they are!"

I dropped the scrubbing brush upon seeing Biata. Tavi was right. She was unusually harmonious, in spite of the ugly mask.

"I've, hello there! What are you doing under this nightmare? Ah, giving her a beauty treatment! Kostya said he massaged her cheeks. And you?"

"All the rest. Why didn't you let us know?"

"Why? What's bad about that?"

"Nothing. Not a bit!"

We were pushed aside and a strong stream of water hit us pretty hard.

"What's that?" asked Biata, frightened.

"Matilda's son, Hector, moved his tail a bit. He's over there, on the port side," explained Kostya.

"The port side? That's sharp! She is rather like a submarine, isn't she?"

Tavi fetched my brush. I took it and twirled it nonchalantly in my hands.

"Let him finish," said Kostya. "You and I will go topside. I've got to do all her back yet, and the right cheek."

"Whose back?" asked Biata, confused.

"Matilda's."

"Ah, Matilda's toilet. How you talk! Gets me all mixed up. How wonderful it is down here!"

Kostya took her arm, but she pulled back.

"No, really, why should I surface? It's awfully interesting here. I haven't felt like a fish for a whole eternity."

"Any place is as good as another," agreed Kostya readily, and began giving orders.

"I've come here. A whole colony of barbels!"

Swimming to another place, he announced he had found a sucking fish of incredible size, and Biata followed him with her arms around Proteus. He had also joined Kostya, and was showing Biata every sign of attention.

Tavi was not pushy and held aloof from Biata. At a respectful distance. But when she swam over to look at the sucking fish, he again talked to me in Morse.

"Harmonious as ...," and he transmitted crackling words, impossible to translate, but which drew a beautiful picture of a crimson jellyfish. "Harmonious as a jellyfish!" I understood and wasn't offended: the crimson jellyfish is certainly unusually lovely when it hangs in clear water. I'm sure Tavi didn't have in mind its poisonous stings, but only its beautiful shape. And besides, Biata was wearing a cherry-red bathing suit.

After breakfast, Kostya brought Biata a tall glass of thick whale's milk.

"It's fresh. From our Matilda. Try it. The taste is rather unusual! Not to mention its nourishing qualities and the amount of calories it contains. Her son, Hector, feeds exclusively on this milk, and gains a hundred kilograms a day."

Biata raised the glass, and took a sip. But now she put the glass back on the table.

"A hundred kilograms? And you offer it to

me? What would I look like after a week? I'll only eat fish and drink fruit juice while I'm here. What pineapples! Up in the meteorological satellite, everything we eat is made from chlorella and its many hybrids. You know, sometimes our cook—a very intelligent robot—invents perfectly fantastic dishes, unlike anything on earth. Her best recipe is called 'Asteroid', a sort of spongy, sweet pudding. Then there's her 'Astronaut's Joy'—ice-cream that looks like moon-quartz crystals."

All the time, Biata was brimming over with excitement, quite natural after her return to Earth. Yet a shade of anxiety came and went on her pale face and occasionally flashed in her eyes. And many times I caught in her glance a look of questioning and surprise, as if saying: here we are under a cast rock awning that protects us from the burning sun, with invisible and noiseless ventilators to provide us with cool, fragrant air; parrots that gossip with each other among the thick, green leaves; butterflies like rainbows and water that runs singing among the rocks.

Biata went to her room to change and Kostya and I were alone.

"You know," he said, "she's different. Biata's worried and depressed over something; somehow, we must get her out of this mood... do something unusual. Apparently, space is a serious thing. Or maybe she's been exposed to radiation—it's a lot stronger up there. She took the watch, went on space patrols, and was a sentry guarding all mankind! Do you realize that? So we'll take her out on a jet-boat as far as the shoals at the fastest clip possible and show her the coral

forest. Too bad we can't go to robot island. Here she is!"

Biata stopped on the edge of the pier made of polished basalt. She was all sparkling in the sun, looking festive and beautiful.

"What a wonderful life you have here! No worries or cares," she said thoughtfully. "And don't look so serious. D'you call this something to worry about? It's pure joy! The ocean and beautiful skies, the marvellous air," she said with an all-embracing gesture. "And all the water you could wish for! On our space-lab, there's only a black void topside or, if you prefer, a desert of darkness. I'm not complaining. But you can't possibly understand what it's like up there. Naturally, it has its good points. No, good isn't the word. We're alone up there with eternity—with the unknown universe. But the beauty of it sort of weighs on you. The stars don't twinkle. It's a black ocean with shining islands. You should see the moon from up there: it's so big, coppery, ponderous! If you could only see that bottomless abyss full of stars, countless stars. A bottomless abyss. And out of this void a hurricane of atom particles is hurtling towards us: somewhere the Supernova is flaring up emitting a mysterious starlight! But here, you never give it a thought. For you, it is only an episode, a cosmic incident that grates a bit on your nerves. But for us—we live with it. It's started haunting me. I see it in my mind as a green sun, now as a fiery cloud burning up the stars. And sometimes I see the Supernova as a yellowish spark no bigger than a grain of wheat."

"You're exhausted, Biata," said Kostya. But

never mind. We've made such plans for today! Now, we'll take out a jet-boat and...."

"No. Later, if you like. First, I want to ramble about on the island. It's such a miracle, your float! The jet-boat and reefs can come later." Then she asked abruptly: "Why did Vera leave so suddenly?"

"Do you know her?" we both asked at once. "For long? How did you meet her?"

"Kostya," Biata smiled, "it was you. You introduced me."

"Me? When? Impossible! Can you figure it, I've?"

"You told her about me," said Biata. "Naturally, she was interested. Besides, their institute supplies us with chlorella, and they have better means of contact with the satellite. She had only the best to say about both of you. And now, let's go!"

Biata, from under the brim of her green hat, stared at everything around us. Her eyes shone happily as she listened to Kostya who, telling her about our adventures, kept adding a few details that were new to me. I didn't interrupt.

Kostya was at his eloquent best. And it is possible I forgot, or never noticed, that Black Jack had thrown a glance of gratitude at Kostya on leaving the jet ambulance. Or that I had saved Kostya's life by shooting a two-metre-long barracuda. I really had shot the barracuda, but it had nothing to do with Kostya being in any danger. Though I won't deny I felt good to see Biata's eyes gleam with admiration. She especially liked the finale to Jack's capture, and his swan song which she would hear later today, and liked Kostya's stubborn determination to save the K-whales.

Trying to distract Biata from her gloomy thoughts, Kostya began to add colour to the story. He described from the psychological viewpoint what he had felt when he stood on Jack's back.

"We'll introduce you to Jack. It's easy to find him now."

"Yes," I put a word in, "he's got a radio transmitter inside him."

"I've's a bit mixed up." Kostya gave me a happy wink. "That transistor was swallowed by one of the K-whales who committed suicide. But I did put one on Jack's dorsal fin, the kind they are now attaching to whale sharks and whales. He shook so hard all over when I finished that I sailed a whole eight metres up in the air."

"No more than three," I corrected him.

Biata looked at me chidingly.

"I prefer the eight metre variant."

"Good shot!" Kostya burst out laughing.

Biata and I laughed, too.

Chauri Singh appeared, coming our way. He bowed to Biata.

"Ive," he said, "I'll have to beg for your help again. My Lagrange is ill. A bit of a sun-stroke. Mark and Nora ordered him to stay indoors for a whole week. Jean's glad I have to leave him in peace. I hope you're not too busy?"

Reading the answer on my face, he smiled for the first time since we met. He had remarkable teeth that gleamed like pearls against his coal-black beard and moustache.

"There's a third seat in the *Kambala*," he remarked.

Kostya squeezed my elbow and gave me a wink.

"Biata's just returned from outer space," he said. "She's an astro-physicist."

Once again Singh respectfully bowed.

"Then we're colleagues of a sort. Only my outer space is a little nearer, and more thickly inhabited." He turned to me. "Something's happened to Big Jacques. He's left the ruins of Troy. We've lost all info channels that connected us. And it's more than likely cachalots have shown up. I'm afraid Jacques knows about it, and he's probably combing his hunting territory. He wouldn't bear an intrusion. We must help him. We can't risk losing Jacques, for our experiments have only begun."

We went to the pier. Beside the wall, two dolphins were rocking the *Kambala* with their noses and peering through the portholes.

"That's Mickey and Paul," said Chauri Singh. "The rascals want to see what's inside. Well, get in, I've. I guess we two will have to set off again."

"But why only you two?" asked Biata. "I always liked underwater trips. Maybe, you'll let me come? Only I'll be an absolutely useless onlooker."

Chauri nodded agreement. "At your disposal are two movie-cameras and a stern gun."

"Let go my arm, Kostya," begged Biata. "The stern gun has decided the matter. Perhaps there's room for a fourth?" she asked, feeling sorry for Kostya.

Kostya knew there wasn't.

"Thanks," he said with unconcealed chagrin. "Somehow I never figured on travelling in the 'saucer' today. Though," hope shone in his eyes, "if I've feels he'd better not go.... Last

time, d'you see, he said that absolute darkness had a bad effect upon him, and besides...."

"No, indeed," said Chauri, already standing at the entrance lock. "Ive knows the motor pretty well. Last time, if it hadn't been for him, I would have been longer getting out of there. This way, please."

Kostya, Proteus and Tavi went down with us for the first twenty metres. Then Kostya knocked at the porthole and headed up towards the sun. The dolphins whistled in farewell only when their outlines could barely be seen outside the glass windows. Behind me, from time to time, came the buzz of the movie-camera: Biata was filming Kostya and the dolphins, and a school of tuna. I remembered how I'd dreamt of her being there during my first depth-dive. And now she was really sitting in the *Kambala*, deep in thought. The faint scent of *Stardust* filled the cabin.

"There's plenty of room here for Kostya," said Biata.

"Sorry," answered Chauri, "but the 'saucer' was only designed for three, especially the oxygen regeneration. You should like the deep seas," he added. "Anyone would find it hard to remain indifferent to the unknown!"

"I do like it, thank you. I feel fine in the 'saucer', and I've been down in the deep seas several times, but only in a tourist submarine whose limit is 200 metres. But the *Kambala*—you know, I've never experienced such a feeling. I keep thinking I'm back in our 'Doughnut', our name for the space-lab. It's shaped like a wheel. However, the sensation is utterly different: it seems as if we were in another dimension in some other part of the universe. Here we are under

the action of other natural laws. And you and Ive look like mysterious people from another galaxy.... What's that? What are those flashes? You'd think a piece of while-hot iron was burning after it hit the upper strata of the atmosphere. Could your micro-squids be alarmed at our intrusion?"

"Those are shrimps. Tons of them." Chauri was silent a few seconds, observing a swarm of blue lights on the screen, and continued. "Comparing the deep seas with outer space has become old hat. And incidentally, many people use both expressions without careful consideration of their real meaning. With you, it's a different matter. You've been in outer space, felt it, so the things you say are not mere empty words."

Biata thanked him. Chauri Singh kept on talking in a confidential tone.

"This is a different world. Different pressures, different diffusions of light and sound: the process and reflection of life differ. Here you may meet organisms even more efficient than your obedient servant—myself—and your good friend Ive. Organisms no less mysterious than the inhabitants of planets in the constellations Aquila, Canis Major, Scorpio and Ursa Major."

Corrington's smiling face appeared on the videoscreen. He was on duty at the Central Post. He said that, according to info provided by the dolphins, cachalots had been seen on the whale pastures and, of course, they weren't interested in plankton and looked upon their blue brothers with condescension. But their behaviour looked suspicious. The dolphins claimed that the cachalots intended doing some work in the deep seas.

"I hope you appreciate the unique possibilities you have right in your lap?" Corrington asked.

"So far," answered Chauri coldly, "I can't appreciate them."

"As usual, you treat my suggestions with an irony all your own. I respect you for that, for I appreciate humour. Sometimes, I even laugh at myself." He winked. "But in this case, I beg you to take me seriously. Don't forget we have no visual info on the 'work' of cachalots in the deep seas. You have the rare opportunity of filling in info gaps and also investigating their contacts with squids. I hope you realize how important such info is?"

"I do. But you must also realize that if they want to 'work' with Big Jacques, I'll use every means I have to stop them."

Corrington shrugged in surprise. Due to distortion, his face spread out all over the screen.

"Are you absolutely serious in saying that?" he asked, his voice shaking. "And you're taking all the responsibility?"

"I am."

"Knowing that such a chance mightn't come our way for the next ten, twenty or even a hundred years?"

"That's right."

Corrington closed his eyes and silently shook his head. Some ten seconds later, he apparently had overcome his anger and indignation.

"I'm flabbergasted. Amazed! Just the same, I won't lose hope," he told Chauri. "And I'm sure everything will turn out all right." He tried to smile cheerfully, but the distortion first flattened out his face, then lengthened it so that

only his funny pursed lips and the tip of his nose were left on the screen.

"I can envy your optimism," said Chauri.

"I don't see why! By the way, may I ask you a few questions?"

The Indian nodded, tiredly.

"Depth is 500?"

"495".

"Wonderful. Are you in the canyon?"

"Not yet."

"Course 140?"

"143."

"Thanks. And one last thing: don't forget you've got a very unusual 'camera' on board. See you soon."

Breaking into a smile, Corrington faded out.

"What a marvellous person!" cried Biata.

"Very. Just so long as things don't concern 'visual info', as he puts it."

"I think that his convictions and interest in this venture justify him. Why shouldn't we do what he asked?"

"I wouldn't care, if it were any other cuttlefish but Jacques. We've got too much staked on him. His whole nervous system is under our control. We inserted a very unique transducer in his brain."

"And you're afraid the cachalots will damage the devices?"

"Yes, and it's more than probable. They might simply make a good dinner of him, or else injure him so that his condition would be far from normal for a long time. So good-bye experiments."

"But doesn't the pathology of these creatures interest you? Not at all?"

"I doubt whether anything of interest will be left after he has a scrap with a cachalot."

"Are you sure the cachalot will win?"

"That's what generally happens because they have more experience and a better developed brain. There are two cachalots, King and Orpheus, who are old hands at fighting."

"How do you expect to prevent them from fighting?"

I sat there, simply enjoying the sound of Biata's voice and paying little attention to the meaning of what she said. I turned round, and she smiled.

"Look!" she cried out suddenly. "There's a crab-like nebula! Now please don't say that something spurted out luminescent liquid. What are they doing there in the dark? Hunting each other? The strong eating the weak? The big ones—the small?"

"Quite often the size of the fighters has nothing to do with it."

Chauri Singh switched on the searchlight. The brilliant beams, resembling the wings of a fantastic flying machine, were almost tangible as they lit up the surrounding sea-scape. Sparks exploded on the sonar screen: something had fallen into the path of the ultrasonic waves. Judging by the sparks, they were fish or small squids. Sometimes, attracted by the shining rays, ivory-coloured fish swam from the outer dark as if they were under a spell, eyes staring, mouths opening and closing.

Two fishes appeared and vanished off our port. The smaller one swallowed the other, which was triple its size.

"Did you see that?" questioned Biata. "How

awful! Though I remember when we studied marine biology, we were shown a film demonstrating all these terrible things.”

“They were only picture copies. Here you see the originals,” put in Chauri.

“It’s the same with outer space. How many times I’ve seen pictures of the starry sky, exact replicas of the universe, films taken a million kilometres away from Earth, or even views shot on Earth. I watched them, sitting in a comfortable chair and knowing that any moment I could leave and go to a park, out into the sunlight. But when I first entered the main observatory of the skylab and looked at the Milky Way, and then at Earth, my heart missed a beat and I broke into tears. I feel a bit like that now.”

Chauri was silent, staring hard at the panel devices. The *Kambala* was descending into the canyon, passing basalt rocks that shocked the mind with their gloomy grandeur. For some reason, however, the sinister walls of the canyon I had seen on my last trip seemed to be missing something. I mentioned this to Singh.

“It’s Jacques that’s missing. He is a necessary and striking part of the scenery. What you see now is an empty house without its owner.”

“He used to stand by those columns, like a student waiting for his first date,” I told Biata.

“Under the clock?” she laughed.

I also began feeling unusually merry, and rocked with laughter. I stole a look at the faintly discernible profile of the Indian in the dim light. His black beard would jut out sharply, and then drop suddenly as he leaned forward to peer at the gleaming gauges.

I kept my eyes on the red dot, slowly moving across a miniature map. The dot was the *Kambala*: it left a blue line on the map, tracing its course. We had left the canyon and were now moving slowly describing corkscrew spirals, searching the black density by radar.

Biata followed the red dot, peering over my shoulder. Her breath warmed my cheek.

"Where can he be?" she whispered. Like all of us, she was also caught by the noiseless hunt after the invisible squid through the pitch-black darkness. She was excited over every spark on the radar screen, or by the mysterious sounds coming sharply over the hydrophone. She had a sense of foreboding that presaged something unexpected and strange, and therefore terrifying.

At the 950-metre level, the blurred contours of a cachalot appeared on the sonar screen. The whale was diving at an angle of 80 degrees. Lower down, at a depth of 1300 metres, a squid shot upwards heading straight for the cachalot.

Chauri Singh dropped the "saucer" sharply down, directing the ship to a calculated point where the rivals should meet.

"If either of them enter the optical field, shoot," he told Biata.

"What? Oh, the gun! But where is it?"

"Press the red key on the stern shield."

"Oh, I see it. It's lit up. Shall I shoot to kill?"

"No one will be killed. You'll only paralyse him for a few minutes. But shoot only in extreme necessity. I'll do most of the shooting myself."

He already was shooting, sending into the cachalot a current of ultrasonic waves. But we were still **too far** away, so that the directed waves

missed him. Finally, he jerked aside, but even so continued to draw closer to the squid.

"I didn't think Jacques was such a bully," muttered Chauri.

"Maybe it's not him?" Biata said, doubtfully.

"It's his territory.... What's up? Darn, the motor again!"

The motor had stopped. The red dot froze on the map. No matter how I tried to fix it, this time the business was a lot more complicated. Chauri Singh sat looking at the sonar screen, not saying a word.

The *Kambala* was carried another 200 metres by pure inertia, then stopped completely. Now we could only move vertically, up or down. The emergency batteries gave us a little power, permitting such manoeuvres. They also supplied the sonar, searchlights and air-regeneration unit. We were practically in no danger, but unable to move horizontally—forward or reverse.

Biata gave a little cry when she saw the squid attack the cachalot broadside, entangling him in all ten tentacles. The fight started. The 80-ton cachalot, with the nimbleness of a fish, began twisting round and round, trying to shake the squid off. It was clear that for now all the advantage was on Jacques' side. He crushed and tore at the enemy's skin with his terrible suckers, pumping out the blood. Besides, the squid could stay underwater indefinitely, but the cachalot had to surface for air not later than an hour and a half after submersion.

Corrington's excited face appeared on the videoscreen.

"Chauri, be a pal and switch the image over

on the video channel. Thanks. Visibility fairly good. Too bad it's not in colour. Can't you move in closer and turn on your lights?"

"No."

"Oh, I get it. Your Jacques is not so dumb. He's playing for time. What a throw! I'll bet anything that Orpheus will finish off that clam...."

"Never!" Chauri Singh turned off the sound of the videophone and his eyes burned into the image showing a whirling greyish-black mass of bodies.

Orpheus had changed tactics. Realizing that he couldn't dislodge the squid that way, he began twirling in fast circles at the same time forcing his way upwards. Jacques tried to break their rise by expanding his mantle or envelope like a parachute, and by using his jet motor. The *Kambala* ascended with them, keeping parallel, and came to a stop when the warriors also stopped and hung motionless in a deadlock. Orpheus darted back. By using this supposedly old trick, he managed to shake off two feelers, though he lost some skin in the process. Whirling with crazy speed on a horizontal axis, he got rid of another two or three gigantic "arms". The force of his twisting was so great that Jacques couldn't grab him again. And Orpheus kept twirling and twirling. Jacques' arms became so twisted, that his huge body was forced out of the infighting. I could feel, physically, the amount of force Jacques was exerting against the inertia of movement. He didn't realize that his own weight was helping Orpheus shake him off.

We all cried out together.

Jacques parted from Orpheus and momentarily disappeared beyond the edge of the screen. The cachalot turned, not leaving the spot, and came to a standstill. On the screen appeared intermittent white lines: the sonars of both rivals were hard at work, searching each other out.

The *Kambala* was sharply thrown aside by the powerful current ejected by Jacques, who was swimming somewhere nearby.

"Was I supposed to shoot?" asked Biata. "Did I miss the right moment?"

"You mustn't shoot! He is now so enraged that he might take us for the cachalot or a new enemy. He has no time to check."

"I felt his approach, thought I saw and reached out to push the button, but we tipped slightly. I realized he had gone past, and was now ahead. Why didn't you shoot, Chauri?"

"Calm down! And remember you mustn't shoot. Not without my command. Get me?"

"All right, I won't. He might suddenly think they're the signals of Orpheus! Of course, I won't shoot."

Chauri Singh widened the sonar beam, and again on the screen we saw the cachalot and the squid. They were tearing towards each other, and I noticed that Jacques moved faster. Orpheus used direct tactics, trying to hit the squid head-on and grab his opponent with his terrible jaws. On the contrary, Jacques urgently tried to avoid the teeth of the cachalot, and mount him again from behind. They began chasing each other in circles. To our great surprise, the *Kambala* found itself in the centre of their circling. The circle narrowed.

What if one of them hits us? I thought, during those incredibly long seconds. And apparently I wasn't the only one to worry about it. The cachalot, in some unbelievable way, developed such speed that he began to close in on Jacques. In all probability, the squid was swimming slower; of course, he was taking a great risk by letting Orpheus get within twenty metres of him. It seemed to us that Jacques was done for: any moment the terrible jaws would grab him. Suddenly, before Orpheus' very nose grew a dark cloud and, as soon as the cachalot plunged into it, the cloud burst apart in blinding, noiseless bubbles. Apparently, Orpheus lost his bearings—the poisonous cloud from cephalopod molluscs paralyse the sense organs of their enemies. As for us, we were simply blinded by this bright grenade and saw nothing for a few seconds except multicoloured circles in front of our eyes. Meanwhile, Orpheus had located the *Kambala* by his sonar and, taking it for the squid, hurled himself into attack. Unaware of it as yet, Chauri turned on all the searchlights in order to scare away both the squid and the cachalot. Seeing Orpheus closing in and forgetting our commander's warning not to shoot without his command, Biata pushed the button automatically. At such close quarters, the ultrasonic charge probably stunned the cachalot momentarily, and knocked him off course. He grazed the boat just the same, and we were swept into the whirlpool of his wake. Nobody was hurt. The *Kambala* continued to slowly rotate a while longer, but it did not prevent us from watching the rest of the battle through the observation windows. Jacques, effectively using the results of his "bomb"

and the unexpected help of Biata, "mounted" Orpheus.

Long separate strands and clouds of red and blue blood hung around the clinched bodies of both fighters.

Sharks appeared: two giant white ones and a few blue. They flashed through the rays of light. So far, they also were mere spectators. The cachalot was weakening. He made a few more helpless attempts to throw off Jacques, who had a deadlock on his tail and clung there like a gigantic unopened parachute. More than an hour had gone by. The oxygen in Orpheus' blood was running out. Metre by metre, the squid pulled him down into the black depths. We followed them down as far as 4500 metres, then quickly surfaced. And just as suddenly as it had stopped, the motor began working.

On the scanner screen Corrington was saying something regretfully to Lagrange standing beside him. Chauri Singh turned on the sound.

"An unexpected ending," said Corrington. "But what an epic battle! A battle of Titans. I told you everything would turn out all right, if you don't count the sad end of Orpheus. You were guaranteed complete safety. Your friend...."

Lagrange interrupted him, smiling.

"Yes, I installed a distance safety-guard. Last time, Chauri, you got too close to the squid and lost an 'arm'. A cachalot is more dangerous than our Jacques. Apparently, the squid didn't suffer much from the battle. Pass on my regards to your brave companions. I'll wait for your return."

"Brave, indeed!" jeered Biata. "I guess we

were, though, because I feel scared only now. Though I can't speak for Ive. My hands are shaking, and I can hardly believe all this was real, especially the fact that I shot at poor Orpheus."

Chauri Singh turned and looked at her sharply, but he said nothing. He had not noticed that Biata had pushed the button on the stern gun.

THE GIANT SQUID

The Giant Squid was lolling in the sun that shone faintly through the grey mass of clouds. Stretched out on the water, he was taking a sun bath. His enormous body, indulging with the roll of the waves, was shaded in ash-grey tones reflecting the hues of sea and sky. Sea birds sailed in silent circles above the Giant Squid. Even the noisy gulls were quiet, as if filled with respect for the monster that had risen from the dark depths.

"A nightmare magnified a thousand times," said Biata.

For a while our *Penguin* hovered over the monster. Then Khi began flying in circles, unaccountably falling into the reigning rhythm of movement. At the time, nobody paid attention to the fact that we were sailing in circles, it all seemed perfectly natural.

The appearance of the Giant Squid was reported by the dolphins this morning, when they burst into the lagoon. They had deserted their posts on the far borders of new plankton fields

and raced home in a panic. They were followed by several other detachments.

"He rose from the darkness," Tavi told me. "Perhaps, there will be a great disaster."

"Did anybody see him?" I asked.

"Whoever sees him never returns."

I asked his opinion about how long the Giant Squid might remain on the surface, and whether we would still find him if we took off in ten minutes.

From excitement, Tavi changed over to the ultrasonic range. Terror froze in his eyes.

I started soothing him, saying that we would fly in the *Penguin* and would be in the air the whole time. The Giant Squid was powerful only in his own element.

Tavi shivered. I also wasn't myself. I advised Tavi to sit out the danger on the "balcony" with Kharita, and he hastily rushed out of the pool where we had been talking and threw himself on the ledge....

We felt that the enormous eyes of the Giant Squid were staring straight at us.

"What's wrong with me?" yawned Biata. "I had such a good sleep last night, but my eyes are closing."

Kostya started to explain why.

"An enormous cyclone is moving our way. Even a meteorological probe couldn't cope with it. The barometer's falling. Take a look at the gauge. That's some specimen, isn't it! I wonder what he's thinking about now, if he's thinking at all. Though Singh and Lagrange and even I've are sure that he has intellect. Just imagine, I'm feeling a bit foggy, too."

"But why is it so quiet?" asked Biata.

"It's always that way before a storm."

"No, somehow this is a special silence. Like down there!"

"Where?"

"In the abyss below. You've never been down, and you can't imagine how quiet it is. And tell me, why are the gulls silent? And why are they flying in circles? And why are we flying in circles? And why is the squid staring like that? How sleepy I am!"

Biata laid her head on Kostya's shoulder. Kostya was afraid to move.

"True enough, the pressure is really low," said Petya Samoilov. "I can't remember anything like it. I guess His Majesty the Squid rises to the surface only under such pressures, and when the sky is cloudy."

Kostya yawned.

"Of course, not being used to it, he would get a terrible sunburn. Look, he's stretching in his sleep. Is that ever a beast! Br-r-r!"

"I guess he's sleeping with his eyes open," said Petya. "He needs solar radiation, so he came up for a nap in his solarium."

"What drivell!" said Biata, shaking her head. "D'you think everybody needs sunshine? Oh, how I'd like to plunge into the dark, and sleep and sleep and sleep. D'you think he's asleep? Or getting a tan? What naive people! He's come up to listen to a bird concert. He thinks we're birds, too. No, one bird. Or birds within a bird. Why are we so high up? We should go lower. He would like to have us closer to him. Then we could shake his paw, or one of his paws."

This struck us as very funny—"to shake his paw"—and we laughed till we cried.

"Quiet!" Biata begged. "Your laughter is like thunder. How can you laugh when he needs silence! See how low the gulls are. They have covered him completely now."

"We should go lower," said Kostya.

"Naturally," agreed Petya.

I also said we seemed to be flying pretty high.

With a smile, Khi began dropping down.

"Now it feels better," said Biata, tripping over her words. "Though we might...." She fell asleep without finishing.

Now we were sailing no more than twenty metres above the Giant Squid.

"I'm sleepy, too," said Khi, and wanted to take the *Penguin* even lower.

He was stopped by Petya Samoilov, who switched the controls over to the auto-pilot and told Khi to leave the pilot's seat.

Khi pulled at the door handle. It's a good thing they don't open during flight. I settled Khi in a chair beside Biata, and he obediently fell asleep. Kostya was also having a hard time fighting off the heavy drowsiness that threatened to overcome him. Later on, when it was all over, he told us that he had wanted to go somewhere, to act, but had fought with all his will against this thoughtless desire for action and, exhausted, had fallen asleep.

At first I wasn't sleepy, nor was I depressed. And I had no desire to leave the plane. On the contrary, I felt like I do after an ion shower, and looked with sorrow at my exhausted companions. Only when Khi tried to open the door did I catch myself feeling regretful that it wouldn't open. Probably, Petya was in a similar

state, because he said that we should have the lock changed.

We were now circling over the Giant Squid with a flock of birds and watching, with malevolent joy, the gulls and then the albatrosses fall into the water and lay like small heaps of feathers around the squid. Some birds fell directly on him and, with a lazy gesture, he tossed them a hundred metres away with one of his "arms".

"Everything's going the way I thought it would," said Petya. "Only for some reason it's taking a long time for us to turn into birds. We must change the door lock, and then...."

And really, if we had had a different door-lock, we could have opened the door and flown in circles, too, I thought to myself. I was overcome by a heavy apathy. Petya was sitting, but I stood beside him in an uncomfortable position; both of us stared with drowsy indifference at the videoscreen where Nilssen, our teacher, Singh, Lagrange and Corrington appeared in turn. They were talking and their voices could be clearly heard in the silence, which was broken only by the flutter of wings and the monotonous drone of the engine. All the same, we couldn't make out what they were saying, nor what Corrington was begging us to do, nor what advice our teacher was trying to give us. Their voices were drowned in the rustling of wings. And this rustling seemed more important and necessary to us than anything else. We listened to it with all our beings, and looked down, aching with a languorous longing.

It never occurred to us to rise higher above

the sea, or at least to fly away and get out of the trance we were in.

The longing left us as suddenly as it had come.

The Giant Squid stirred, his body began to sink deeper, and only his head and the cluster of tentacles rose above water. He seemed to be standing up, leaning over to look around.... His tentacles flashed upward and spread out, taking the form of a loathesome flower.

"What a beautiful lily," said Kostya.

I could hear and understand him, but I still failed to grasp what the people on the screen were trying to tell me with urgent gestures.

"What an aroma!" cried Kostya, painfully frowning. "Can you smell the flower?"

"He smells of fish, your squid! That's Biata's *Stardust* you smell. My Biata!"

Kostya burst into laughter, and I wasn't the least surprised that Petya had changed places with him. He was sleeping beside Biata, her head on his shoulder. And Kostya was standing beside me, laughing.

"You're all mixed up!" said Kostya. "Biata's in love with me, and nobody else."

"What about Vera?"

"Vera's in love with me, too."

"And you?"

"I'm in love with them both. I love everybody, and everybody loves me. And they would love me even more, if it wasn't for you. You're in the way, spoiling our happiness. D'you know that?" he asked, looking happily down below us.

"No, you're wrong. It's me who loves Biata."

"Shut up! Can you see the island below? There's a flower in the middle, and around it grow trees, coconut palms. Now I'll maroon

you on that island, and there you'll meet a girl more beautiful than Vera or Biata."

Really and truly, there was a green island below. The surf was breaking against its low shoreline.

"Land me there, only hurry up," I agreed, and everything blacked out....

Long ago, in my childhood, I had a terrible dream. I called on all my will-power to try to wake up and get rid of the nightmare. Finally, I opened my eyes. And I saw a room I didn't recognize, strange furniture, and the wind was blowing in the window fluttering blood-red curtains. Outside, there was a strange town. Houses with peaked roofs, high towers swaying in the wind. I got out of bed and went to the window to wake up a second time lying on the floor of my own room. My mother was leaning over me.

"What's wrong? Why are you on the floor?" she asked.

In the mini-copter *Penguin*, sailing over the Giant Squid, I experienced something like it, only more vividly. Still not realizing where I was, I looked around for Biata and Kostya, very worried about them. Biata was still asleep in her seat, curled into a ball. Kostya was whispering something, Khi was flying the plane. Petya was attentively listening to Kostya. Below lay the sea, all in white-caps. Not far away, another plane was flying as well—the *Kolymaga*. No, all this couldn't be a dream. Through half-closed eyes, I was enjoying the blessed feeling of peace and happiness that had caught me and, at the same time, feeling sorry that we had left so early the planet Linley, which I had been dreaming about.

Kostya raised his voice. I listened to him for a few minutes and wondered: "Am I dreaming, or what?" His story seemed incredible. He was actually relating my dream, all that I had dreamt of down to the minutest detail. Only, in places, he permitted himself creative freedom. I could hardly sit still.

"Oh, so you're awake," said Kostya, turning to face me. "Just listen what I dreamt about. A regular science-fiction story."

"About how we visited the planet Linley?"

"Hear that?" winked Kostya to the others. "He was only pretending to be asleep. Now don't interrupt, I've. Well, we landed gently on the landing slot, polished like this control panel, even better. We were standing, with legs numb from the long journey, admiring the scenery. But, to tell the truth, there wasn't much to admire. The landscape outside the spaceport was absolutely dreadful. The mountains were jagged, like the teeth of the white shark, the air was all fog. And suddenly we, or Biata rather, heard a hissing and clanging sound. A column of monsters, very much like squids, were marching towards us. Our only way of escape was to run like blazes, but we couldn't. Our legs refused to carry us backward, would move only ahead. So we walked straight towards that formation of monsters. And just imagine, we weren't scared. Look here, Petya, take that smile off your face. It seemed as real as life."

I backed him up.

Kostya considered my remark to be a rather corny joke, but Petya and Khi exchanged glances.

"Well, let's see what you've got to say about

this," continued Kostya. "Anyway, all these squids turned out to be robots. They passed us by without a glance. They had come to polish the spaceport. Holding the handles of the floor-polishers with their tentacles, they spun the buffer-discs very fast. You could see perfectly well that the robots were powered by solar batteries. Their bodies were covered with plates of gleaming mother-of-pearl, and these had come loose on many of the robots, so that the plates dangled from the electrodes. That's where the clanging or ringing sound had come from. It actually sounded rather nice."

"A most interesting hallucination," said Khi. "Personally, all I saw was two suns. One was green, the other red. I tried to hide but there was no place to go, for there was no shade, not a tree or even a bush to be seen. But please go on, Kostya."

"Well, one of the robots fell down," continued Kostya, throwing me a triumphant look.

"... and rolled towards us," I put in, "banging his tentacles against the spaceport's shiny surface with every turn. You and Biata jumped aside just in time."

Kostya nervously licked his lips.

"I've, I know you can read my mind sometimes, but please don't do it now. Keep your blinking magician's tricks to yourself," he said.

"I'm not playing tricks," I said. "Do you want me to continue your story?"

"Go ahead."

"Well, another robot fell and couldn't get up."

"That's right. Keep on going."

"Then a grav-powered plane appeared..."

"...with another robot in it," put in Kostya. "Well?"

"So we got in, flew across the spaceport and then over cheerless rocky plains. Lots of dead robots were lying about..."

"...stark dead," added Kostya. "But wait a minute. All that isn't so hard to guess. But tell me what the squid-pilot told us."

"He told us the history of how they conquered the planet."

"You're making progress. Go on."

"It's incredible," interrupted Biata. "But I saw all that in my dream, too. Right at this point, I was asked to repair the solar batteries. And my knowledge of them came in handy. The thing is, one of my doubles had been sent in for re-smelting. At least, that's what the boss of the grav-powered plane said. And all because she didn't know much about solar batteries."

"What do you think of that?" cried Kostya, rubbing his hands gleefully. "And you laughed! Why, it's a triple dream. I guess nothing like this ever happened before in all the history of dreams. Biata, tell us how the space visitors perished: all we heard from the squid-pilot. I believe he was the one in charge."

"No, he wasn't," said Biata. "The head boss, or dictator, was somebody else. The squid-pilot of the grav-plane carried out the orders of someone unknown, it might even have been an Electronic Brain."

"Possibly," said Kostya. "And before they perished, the squid people could have programmed the army of robots. The thing is, another group of immigrants were on their way to Lin-

ley; and the robots were supposed to build either an artificial sea or, at least, good reservoirs."

"A water civilization?" Petya looked questioningly at Biata.

"Yes, they lived in water," continued Biata. "The first immigrants had already settled the planet. We saw pools in very bright windowless buildings. You should have seen the frescos on the walls. An absolutely indescribable gamut of colour in an underwater world. And those mollusc people with slant eyes.... They all died a very long time ago."

"From some kind of virus," concluded Kostya.

"I guess so," agreed Biata. "The grav-plane pilot told us that the robots had managed to build many reservoirs, but then they started to die out because of surface corrosion; and the people from inner corrosion." Biata stopped to catch her breath. "Now comes the most interesting part. In some way or other, they took matrices of us, and began making our doubles."

Then Biata related how we had stood on the sun-baked square, watching our doubles come out of a black door—exact copies of us. They came out in threes and, without even glancing our way, walked off along a yellow-paved road.

"Mass hypnosis," suggested Petya.

Khi shook his head.

"I don't think so. In that case we should have to admit that we had dealings with a highly intelligent hypnotist. In order to pass on such images by suggestion, one must possess the ability to perceive any kind of info and deliberately transform it in the minds of other beings."

"We should have a talk with our specialists

in bionics," decided Petya. "It certainly is all very complicated and, so far, not so easy to explain. But one thing is perfectly clear to me: if that door had opened during flight, then you and I, Khi, wouldn't be listening to this science-fiction story the others dreamt of, nor would they be alive to tell it."

Biata was deep in thought. "This 'Unknown' was able to tune us synchronically," she said, "and, drawing on the most vivid imagination of the three of us—Ive's or Kostya's, not mine—created the wonderful dream.... Oh, there's our island! Whales, dolphins.... No, I could never agree to leave our beloved Earth for very long."

THE ETERNAL WIND

The palm trees were twisted and grew at an angle, all slanted the same way. The sand reflected the unbearable sunlight and the ocean raged in anger after each useless attempt to charge across the barrier reef. The green bushes between the tree trunks had hard, shiny leaves and red flowers. Dry palm leaves and split coconut shells lay on the sparkling coral sand. Sand both fine and coarse, formed of coral and seashells ground by the lapping waves, filled our sandals, spilling out with each step to be swept away by the wind.

Walking was difficult but joyous. Difficult because our feet got stuck in the sand; joyous because Biata was with us. She was walking with Kostya far ahead. Beside me, Vera was whistling an improvised melody she had borro-

wed from the trade-wind. She was smiling, her eyes narrowed behind huge sun glasses. She wasn't at all bothered because Kostya and Biata were talking and laughing in the distance. She was simply happy, as I was, and as we all were during those wonderful days. We were in the throes of enchanted love, filled with an unfathomable belief that everything was going the way it should. At first, I wanted to quicken my pace, but Vera stopped me with a glance. "Don't! Let them be. They want to be alone," her big grey eyes told me.

"All right," I said aloud. "We'll leave them alone." And I took her hand with mixed feelings of joy and despair. Suddenly, walking became easier though the wind was blowing hard in my face, and I had to help Vera.

We were visiting this atoll for the first time. There are eight of them in all—little dots of land lost in the ocean and preserved for bird-life and people looking for solitude. Everything remained exactly the way it was a thousand years ago. Only the flora was richer, and the sand had grown finer. Over the last few years, many palm-trees had been planted on the island by young couples who spent their honeymoon here. Tiny plaques were attached to the palms giving the dates that the happy couples had planted their coconuts.

"People are funny," remarked Vera. "They always want to write down their names, for eternity. A tempting but sad aspiration, and doomed to failure. Even the pyramids had to be covered with plastic so they wouldn't be swept from the face of the earth by the winds and sand."

On the windward side of the island, adult birds and fledglings sat with their beaks pointing into the wind so the sand would not get under their feathers. They followed us with watchful eyes.

"Did you notice how they looked at us?" Vera inquired. "Like owners observing invaders. Don't pull me so hard, you'll jerk my arm off. Stop a minute, so I can catch my breath."

We stood with our backs to the wind. The palm trees were slightly quivering, resisting the streaming wind. Our white jet-boat in the lagoon rocked on the rippling water.

"Everything here looks as if it were only a few days after the creation of the world," said Vera. "Except that the wind ruffles our hair. But then, it was calm and still," she affirmed. "Very still."

"Why still? I should have thought the opposite."

"You don't understand a thing about the creation of worlds." She was silent a while, and then spoke without looking at me. "Listen, this verse explains it more or less:

The sky and water
And sand and palm trees
Frowning bird-life
Blowing winds
The eternal wind
That removes all the grief of times long past."

"Actually," Vera continued, "it would have been better to say 'bringing all the grief'. Even so, it's not very good verse. I heard the lines, or read them somewhere. But I wish I could

say something that has never been said before. Yet it's incredibly difficult."

I liked the melancholy lines, and especially Vera's voice, so deep and musical. I complimented her.

Vera shook her head.

"No, they don't quite express what I wanted to say. And it's only average free verse."

"You're too hard on yourself," I said. "You certainly hit it right about the wind. And you described the island to a T. It has a primeval look."

"Not quite. Lovers of solitude have been here, yet all signs of them have been erased. That's what makes it so sad. The past should always be with us. It enriches us. Without it, we'd be living like these birds.... No, that's not right, either. The birds themselves are in their past. They are as conservative as nature herself. Without a past, people would be like uninhabited islands." She stood staring blankly at the dancing billows in the distance, and then tossed her head.

"What about this verse?"

The eternal wind keeps bringing us times long past
Times long past repeated everywhere
Within this sky
Within this ocean
In this fine sand
In whispering palms
And within us
In every atom one finds the past...."

Vera looked at me questioningly. "No, don't say anything, I've. Let's go. It's not a finished poem. It's wandering somewhere nearby, unseen. Occasionally letting me know it is there.

But the lines are a whole theme in themselves."

We walked on, holding hands, our feet sinking into the sand. She bravely faced the blowing wind.

"There's a great, tremendous theme in the words: 'The eternal wind'. I should like to compose a ballad about the fearless ones who go forth to meet the wind and those driven by the wind. And you know who gave me the idea? The dolphins' father. The man with the iron heart. I like to talk with him in his study among his endless 'sunsets', with Miss Charming attentively listening, the robot who remembers everything and who comes out with aphorisms, some to the point and other not. Do you remember in the *Albatross* when Pavel Mefodevich asked us: 'What, caught in a breeze? The wind's rising, now. It won't be stopped. No matter how many reefs you take in, the wind will run a gale. And let it. Only watch you trim the sails. Your port's far off. Oh, so far!' Remember?"

I replied that I did remember that sententious speech, and that I had thought it was a bit pompous at the time.

"I didn't. And I liked Pavel Mefodevich at once. Kostya wasn't fair to him, he was even cruel. Yet the teacher immediately found something worthwhile in Kostya, despite all his expansive bravado and capricious mind. Kostya is now going through great inner changes. He admits it himself, and he's grown up a lot this month. He's beginning to understand himself more, and others, too. He thinks he hasn't always been fair to some peo...." She broke off and looked at me.

"Well," I said. "We never had any serious arguments, but I used to annoy him sometimes with my psychoanalysis. Except for that, everything's okay between us."

"I suppose I shouldn't have told you."

"Why not?"

"Too true. I guess you should know everything about a friend.... What a wind! Hang on to me, or I'll be swept out as far as the reefs."

We waited for the gust to blow itself out.

"You see," Vera continued. "I've been talking so much about the wind. The last time I saw the dolphins' father, he told me about his tragic space-flight, and his heart. Then he left the house to see me off, threatening Miss Charming with general repairs and leaving her at home. That's when he first spoke of the profound meaning of the past. 'Without the past, people are like uninhabited islands'—those are his very words. It was he who gave me that maxim. I'll use it for the motif of my ballad. The dolphins' father was very talkative and generous that evening. The trade winds were blowing gently and softly. He listened for a while, and then said: 'How wonderful that we have an eternal wind blowing over our planet! I don't like absolute calm. There isn't such a thing in nature, anyway.'" Vera looked up at the Milky Way. "Even up there, an eternal wind is blowing, filling the sails of the universe. Isn't that splendid?"

"Tremendous!"

Biata and Kostya were waiting for us on the beach. The wind was filled with spray: our hands, faces and hair were finely coated with salt. Some way off, dolphins were playing among

the waves, probably Tavi and Proteus. They were watching us from a distance, and now wanted to make their presence known. We waved at them and, as if saluting, they both jumped in unison out of the water and vanished behind a rising blue crest.

"I'm not used to real wind any more," Biata called out. "You don't feel the solar wind up there; it comes from the centre of our galaxy, and from thousands of billions of other sun systems."

Vera's eyes lit up.

"Did you hear how she put it? Sounds almost like Pavel Mefodevich."

"I'm sick of your wind," cried Kostya. "I'd enjoy sitting down somewhere in a quieter place. Come on, there are some cabins here." Without waiting for an answer, he walked towards a palm grove. Here, they grew very thick, planted by numerous lovers of solitude. Beyond the wall of palms, you could speak without straining your vocal chords.

"We aren't going to plant any new trees; there's too many, as it is," remarked Biata. "Look how feeble some are! And so many are broken or dead from lack of moisture."

"I have a different idea," said Kostya. "We could leave behind a reminder of ourselves and win popularity, or even glory another way."

"Here?" asked Biata.

"Right on the island!"

"Sounds tempting," said Biata with a smile, "but a little too venturesome. Don't say you want to chop down the palm grove?"

"May the Giant Squid save me from such treachery! It's much more simple. All we have to

do is take all the signs off the trees, put them in a pile, and leave a note that it was we who did it."

"I guess you don't feel well," said Vera. "Where do you get such crazy ideas from?"

"I don't know, but I'm always trying to find out. I think I've inherited a strong genetical memory from my ancestors. As our teacher once said: 'So many unfathomable things they did!'"

"What you consider a naive custom has a profound meaning," said Vera, in a different tone, looking hard at Kostya. "Somewhere I read a very old aphorism: 'He who has not killed an enemy, born a son or planted a tree, has lived his life in vain.' Just by planting a tree and leaving at least that much behind, gives some meaning to life. A tree is a reminder of happiness."

"That sounds wonderful, and it's a very beautiful custom," agreed Biata. "Unfortunately, there's no room here, and it's a bad thing to plant a tree that will only die or grow up feeble and dwarfed."

"That's right," quipped Kostya. "What's the use of having a feeble memorial! Let's fly to California and plant a sequoia, then take off again and fly along a curved trajectory all the way to Kenya. There we could plant a baobab tree, one for each of us. Oh, there's Lovers' Castle!"

A little cabin stood facing the lagoon, sheltered from the wind by the palm grove. It was built in Russian style. Somebody who had fled "far from the madding crowds" had built it of palm logs and thatched the roof with palm leaves.

"How lovely!" exclaimed Biata. "And made of real wood."

"Memorial wood," corrected Kostya. "I wonder who the architect was?"

The only window, wall-to-wall size, was partly open. The door was open as if inviting guests. Sitting on the floor, tiled with coral-like material, sat a lightly dressed bearded man of indefinite age. He was fiddling around with a universal tourist device which the inventor had meant to supply electric power for heating food, for lights and other such things on such holiday occasions. Such devices didn't work too badly, that is, if you followed at least half of the instructions.

The bearded man's eyes flashed angrily, and in place of saying 'hello' he growled: "Darned machine!"

A short, plump woman was sitting in a corner before a fairly large wall mirror, examining her face. We could only see her back.

"I've got such a tan," she was saying, "Nobody will know me. Where's my face cream?"

"I'm going to throw the silly thing into the lagoon," said the Beard, looking at us hopefully. "The voltage drops all the time. Why, you could sit on the electric stove; and there's no power for shaving or light. See what I look like? And it's another whole week before they come to take us off!"

"I told you to bring along a solar battery device," said the woman.

Biata and Vera begged their pardon for dropping in uninvited, and started to leave. But the man's look of appeal held Kostya and me. Kostya squatted down beside him, took the de-

vice in his hands and looked it over. Then pronounced his verdict.

"It's done all it could."

"That's what I thought."

"Really," said the woman. "Three grown men, and none of you can fix such a simple thing."

"But everything comes to an end, some time, Ida!" retorted her husband.

"Okay," said Kostya. "We'll give you ours."

"And what will you do?"

"We came by jet-boat, and we've got plenty of energy stored up."

"Oh," cooed the woman softly. "We're so very grateful. It's all his fault. I told him to bring along solar batteries. Who else would ever bring an electric stove that works on a dry-battery power unit? And to the tropics? How fortunate for us that you were here. Did you come to plant coco palms?"

"Nowhere left to plant them," said Kostya.

"That's right. There's hardly any room left. And it used to be so deserted here. We planted a coconut and waited for it to break through the ground. We watered it every day. You should fly to the Coral Sea. Still some deserted islands there, or go to the Sahara, maybe. Best of all, of course, is to go to Australia. Planting an eucalyptus is very fashionable nowadays."

Kostya went to get the electric cooker. I was left with Ida and the Beard. He sat on the electric stove, lost in thought and wearing a philosophical smile. Meanwhile, Ida continued to talk.

"Somewhere on the island," she said, "our coconut palm is growing. We went to look for it several times, but always lost our way. Our tree has a gold sign on it. We planted it fif-

teen years ago, and today is its anniversary. We watered it till it poked through the ground. We came back after five years, and you should have seen how big it was! It was then we put on the gold sign." Ida's face radiated happiness. "This cabin wasn't built then. Anyway, here we are, back again. So you say there's no room left to plant anything? Don't be upset. If you don't find an island here, then go to Australia.... Where did your nice girls go, by the way? We'll invite you to our anniversary party. I'll fix something...."

Kostya entered out of breath and set our new Edelweiss stove on the floor. The Beard jumped to his feet. We refused their invitation, and he came out to see us off.

"Did you find your tree?" Kostya asked.

The Beard took a surreptitious look at the cabin.

"I'm afraid, even if our tree is still alive, it's not on this island," he said in a whisper.

"Then what will you do?"

"Oh, I planned everything out at home. I ordered another sign and when I got here I rubbed it with sand to age it. I'll put it temporarily on one of the palm trees. I guess such a little white lie isn't so awful, is it? It'll make Ida so happy. For the last few years, she's talked of nothing but that palm tree."

"I think it's perfectly all right," confirmed Kostya, with authority.

"That's what I think. Why not make a person happy? The palm tree isn't what matters is it?"

"Absolutely not."

While we walked the 150 metres to the lagoon,

we made friends with this kindly man. When we said good-bye, he shook hands with us heartily and invited us to drop in.

LOVERS OF SOLITUDE

A passenger hydroplane flew over the island, banked in a slow turn and came in for a landing. It splashed into the lagoon, and the hatches opened. Coloured packs were tossed into the water which quickly inflated into broad-beamed sloops.

Kostya jumped for joy.

"Five hundred lovers-of-solitude, not counting the crew!"

Waving our hands, we greeted the tourists. A few people in the first sloop waved back. The boats moved sluggishly towards the beach: each held about a hundred passengers. Some wore white panama hats, others sombreros, still others sported Japanese straw hats, and some were hatless. One hat was whipped off by the wind, and everyone rocked with laughter as it flew over the water and was caught by one of our dolphins before it touched the waves. Proteus, for it was he, gallantly returned it to the owner. Cries of joy followed from the other boats and, at the same moment, all cameras were focused on Proteus.

"I wonder how many family albums will be decorated with that picture," said Vera. "Too bad I didn't bring my Condor camera."

"Don't let it get you down," said Kostya. "Nothing's easier than that trick with the hat. You can shoot a whole film from any scenario—

Proteus, Khokh, Tavi, Kharita, Kok-i-ekh, and as many actors as you like, will offer their services."

"How tempting," replied Vera. "As soon as I have some spare time..." she cut her words short.

We also silently watched the arriving tourists. In the wink of an eye, they had inflated tents, stretched out awnings and opened beach umbrellas of enormous size. One painter was setting his easel up right at the water's edge. People were already swimming in the lagoon. Two tourists, one in red shorts and the other in white, were climbing palm trees, showing off their skill.

"A perfectly ordinary beach," said Vera.

"Let's take a walk around," suggested Biata. "I'm lonely for people, even for a big crowd!"

Most tourists took us for one of themselves: only three days had passed since the excursion began, and not all of them were acquainted with each other. All the same, it was apparent that we were different. Perhaps our sun-tan was darker, or our faces failed to express quite as much delight as theirs. So the more experienced travellers came up to us and shook hands heartily.

To them, we seemed like real conquerors of outer space and the deep seas, which meant that we were representatives of the most romantic professions on earth.

It was in the tourist camp that we discovered the Supernova had exploded. And a red-headed young man, carrying a butterfly net, rather gaily added that he had just caught a fly.

"Imagine, a real, honest-to-goodness fly!"

he exclaimed, his face shining. "How did it get here? It's the biggest sensation after the Supernova!

Biata's whole body seemed to swoop towards him.

"It exploded?" she asked.

"Long ago. But just I caught this fly now. Just look at its distinctive features, and the rainbow-coloured wings."

"A local species," said Kostya disparagingly, to avenge Biata.

Back in the jet-boat on the way to a real uninhabited island—or so Kostya promised—Biata couldn't keep silent any longer.

"Just think! A fly is more important to him than the Supernova."

At that moment, while talking with the dolphins over the hydrophone, Vera laughed. Tavi's answers had amused her. But Biata was offended and looked at her bitterly. Vera's laughter seemed out of place.

Attentively holding the helm, Kostya sighed, feeling sorry for Biata.

"You should look at things more philosophically," Kostya told her, and was silent for a good twenty seconds. "Yes, philosophically," he repeated.

Vera nudged me sharply with her elbow.

"If you consider these two things according to the size of the meta-galaxy, the relative meaning becomes obvious. The fly and the star become equal."

"Don't you dare repeat such heresy!" cried Biata, turning on him.

"Heresy?" Kostya jumped to his feet so abruptly that we could hardly keep our seats.

"Well, maybe not heresy. Heresy is too mild a word for what you just said!"

"So that means it's even worse—an absurdity!" Kostya helped her out. "Wonderful!"

The jet-boat lurched over, and we were drenched by a stream of water from an open port-hole.

"I won't permit you to compare a star with some fly!" Biata blew up.

"If you don't understand the given evidence, I'll continue, and prove that that wonderful fly is much better than any star," said Kostya.

"I'd rather you took me back to the lovers of solitude," begged Biata.

"No, listen. You must listen."

Biata looked at us pleadingly.

I told her it was impossible to stop Kostya now. The only way to finish the discussion was to listen to him, asking him to be brief.

"Yes, I'll be short," Kostya confirmed. "If we speak of the fly as a living creature and as being the final result of material development, in that case the star is merely raw material. We don't know whether a fly could even develop from it. We don't know how much energy went into the making of one cell—and a fly has millions of cells."

"I give up," said Biata. "Kostya is a great dialectic. It's impossible to argue with him."

Kostya simply beamed.

So peace was restored in the small cabin of the *Frigate*.

"So it exploded at last," mused Biata. "It's already shining, and soon will rise over the ocean... and we'll see it. What's it like, I wonder? No, don't," she stopped Kostya. "Don't

switch on the news telecast. We'll see it ourselves. I can imagine how Wood and the other fellows up there feel! Call up the island, and let's send them a telegram. It would be impossible to see any of them on video, not now...."

SUPPER ROUND THE LIVING FIRE

The dolphins guided our *Frigate* to a little island, a narrow strip of land shaped like a horse-shoe. We were still a few miles away, and it could only be seen from the crest of each large ninth wave.

The sand was a dazzle of brightness. Palms swayed above it through a quivering haze. The dolphins showed us the island first: it was surrounded by insurmountable reefs. Only Tavi and Proteus knew of the secret, winding channel through the coral forest and rocks.

Biata and Vera stood upright and watched the approaching island.

"What a tiny doughnut!" cried Biata.

Using the voice of an experienced tourist guide, Kostya began telling all he knew about the island from navigation handbooks and what inspiration prompted him to add.

"The doughnut," he said, "belongs to the archipelago of the Coral Islands. Its name is 'Bivouac of the Three Rovers.'"

"Why not four?" asked Vera.

"Because, before us, three lovers of solitude came here and decided to establish a colony. One should add that the yacht of the travellers sank after striking the reefs. The three brave men managed to save only a small part of the

ship's equipment, food products, fishing tackle; and thanked the fates for their unusual adventure, rare in our time, when surprises are reduced to microscopic doses. They had a tent like the one we had, which the rats gnawed through on the *Ring of Jasper*. The first night they were carried far out to sea, and were picked up by an air patrol on its way to the Antarctic."

Kostya fell silent: the boat was entering the channel, and all attention was necessary in order to avoid a repetition of the fate of the three rovers by hitting the reefs.

"It's a very young island," said Vera. "Only a few centuries have elapsed since it rose from the ocean depths. From that time, Old Man Ocean has worked hard to help it grow—bringing slabs of coral from the barrier reef, sand, and seashells, carefully grinding them fine and setting them in place. It was he who planted the coconut palms during the rainy period, and now he sits back admiring his creation. At times, in fits of rage, the ocean destroys most of his work, but soon becomes repentant and starts over again. In about two hundred years, he will have finished building the lagoon, but long before that people will start helping him by planting trees to retain the sandy soil."

"We'll plant our palm trees here, too," said Biata.

"Yes," said Vera. "But first, we'll go for a swim in the lagoon with the wise dolphins...."

"Later on, I'll make you a prehistoric supper," promised Kostya.

"Ah, the promised supper. How long we've been waiting for that," said Biata, smiling.

"A feast in the moonlight," said Vera.

"And in the light of the Supernova," added Biata.

Now we were entering the bay. Biata, then Vera, jumped overboard and disappeared in the depths.

With a thundering roar, the waves assaulted the barrier reef, then wearily and lazily rolled across the bay, sizzling on the sand and playing with the broken shells on the beach.

I dropped anchor. The *Frigate* swung round with its stern pointing shoreward, and began rocking wildly. A cormorant flew by, sliding its eyes over the boat.

We sat on the foredeck, our legs dangling overboard, and watched the girls. Tavi and Proteus were swimming around them, in case barracudas showed up. A flock of gulls rose at the sound of the girls' laughter.

"While on the island of Lovers-of-Solitude," said Kostya, "we were all indignant when we heard the Star spoken of with disrespect. And I hurt that fellow's feelings when I told him that really interesting fly was only a 'local' species. At the moment, I'm trying to figure out how I personally relate to this cosmic event. And, you know, I can't see that it's anything special. It exploded and it will fade out. And so what? I've no sense of danger, don't worry about it like Biata does. Yet it actually is an important event. Where does my indifference come from? Perhaps, we got so used to waiting for it to happen, that we were inwardly prepared and so don't react?"

"Probably," I answered vaguely, antagonized because I recognized my own thoughts.

Lately, it often happened that one of us wo-

uld express the thoughts of the other outloud. Our close contact with the dolphins had a lot to do with it. Without realizing it, we had learned to exchange with them quite complicated thoughts.

Kostya guessed what I was thinking.

"You know what?" he said. "Pretty soon I'll be as good a psychoanalyst as you...." He laughed, slapped my back and jumped overboard.

"He'll never change," I thought happily, and waited for him to surface.

The tired red sun hung low in the sky above the water, but was still furiously scorching my back. The wind dropped and the surf on the reefs could be heard more clearly. It seemed to me that the crash of every wave and its rumbling race shoreward could be heard as distinctly as the sound of one instrument in an orchestra.

Kostya surfaced right by the shore.

He leaped on the beach and ran. Biata and Vera were walking towards him, their long shadows gliding over the sand.

"I-live!" he called from the beach. "We're off to plant trees." Kostya picked up a broken piece of a giant conch shell, and shouldered it. They walked towards the first slanting palm tree, Kostya between Vera and Biata.

How harmonious they are! I thought. They make the strip of sand come alive, even the sun and ocean look different.

I dived into the water and swam to join them.

We planted about fifteen coconuts. Kostya dug the holes with the broken shell till he reached damp sand. It had rained recently, so the

holes didn't take long to fill with water, nor did we have to dig them very deep.

"They'll grow," said Vera. "Soon there will be a whole grove here!"

"A large grove," pointed out Biata. "You have to plant a lot of trees at once, then you won't have the trouble that man with the beard had."

"That's right," said Kostya. "We'll plant some more in the morning. But now, let's go for firewood before the sun plops into the sea. I see a few fallen palm trees over there."

Somewhere, Kostya had dug up an axe, and an honest-to-goodness saw—not a vibration saw that cuts the hardest wood like butter, but an old, ancient one with big teeth. To saw through the log, you had to grab the handles and pull the saw back and forth from both ends.

"No modern technology today," joked Kostya. "Even the use of electricity is prohibited. We use only the tools of our long vanished forefathers. Though, come to think of it, my granddad still used a saw like this. Actually, this is his saw. They sent it to me from home. Pull away, I've.... Pull, and don't jerk it out of my hand."

We pulled the steel ribbon, its teeth tearing out bits of wood. The saw sang and the sawdust flew. Biata and Vera stood spellbound, watching us work. Kostya chopped the wood into kindling, and I carried armfuls of it to the water, piling it on a small spit of land with sloping banks.

Tavi and Proteus were terribly interested in our preparations. The two dolphins swam right to the very shore and watched my every move-

ment, keeping silent so as not to bother me.

"There's going to be a big fire," I said, through the hydrophone.

"What for?"

"To make supper."

"Like a little sun? A living fire?"

"Yes."

They began a lively debate on the subject. Neither Tavi nor Proteus had ever seen "living fire"; only the cold light of different lighting devices on the floating island and on ships. They had heard about "living fire" only from Kharita.

The bright hues of the sunset had not yet faded when, low over the horizon, an orange ball the size of a big citrous fruit appeared in the constellation of Serpens. Its light was so vivid and strong that the whole world around was at once tinged with orange.

None of us said a word. Biata looked at us silently, as if saying: There it is! It exploded, and you never believed it would. Her eyes held a mixture of surprise, joy and terror.

The orange light added dissonance to the effective pyrotechnics in the west. The colours ran together and faded away, except for a single blood-red strip of sky above the sea which flamed like molten steel. Even that soon vanished, and the orange star was ruler of the night sky, extinguishing all else, even distant stars. It transformed the night into an orange twilight.

"My head's filled with it, even my thoughts are orange," said Vera.

"For the star, it's an orange death," said Biata, drooping her head sadly.

"I like it," announced Kostya. "It's a fine big star. It's real, all right! Makes you want to hold it in your hands. Or kick it like a football."

"You'd do better to tell us where your supper is."

"Ah, supper! Don't tell me you think the appearance of any little star could spoil our supper?"

But nobody moved an inch. We still weren't used to the ominous light of the star. It seemed quite close, like a Jack-a-lantern suspended in the sky.

The world had become orange. The horizon was erased. We stood on orange sand. Orange shadows from orange-lit tree trunks cut across the beach and lay on the water. Orange surf wearily pounded an orange barrier reef.

"The world certainly has turned orange," said Biata. "But it won't be long before everything changes and becomes the same as it always was."

"After supper," quipped Vera. "Come on, Ive, I'll light the campfire, and you help. You've a knack for it. We'll stack the kindling and logs wigwam style.... No, on second thought, you just pass me the wood. We'll put the coconut fibre in the centre."

"I asked the dolphins to catch a tuna fish," Kostya told Biata. "Or a couple of parrot fish, at least. You'll see what a tasty dish it will be. That is, if Ive didn't bring Glauber's salt, instead of table salt. No. Here, try it. I think this time Ive came through."

"It's real table salt," confirmed Biata.

The typical breathing of the dolphins could

be heard rapidly approaching the shore. Kostya jumped into the lagoon and swam to meet them. Soon his triumphant shout came.

"It's a tuna. Light the fire!"

"We should light it by rubbing two sticks together, or by some other primitive method," said Vera. "Only I'm afraid we wouldn't be very good at it. So let's use a lighter. Has anybody got one? Hand it over. Thanks."

A bright red path of light from the fire ran shaking across the orange water.

Tavi and Proteus swam close to the shore, discussing everything we did. The hot tongues of flame, the acrid smoke, the crackling of the burning logs shooting out streaks of sparks—all delighted them immensely. But, for some reason, neither of them asked about the star. We could easily see that they were strangely indifferent to the rare phenomenon.

"Doesn't anybody want to go for a walk along that path?" asked Biata, looking at the fiery trail.

"Why not? I do," answered Kostya, busy cleaning the tuna at the water's edge. "We'll take a stroll on it after supper."

"Stop talking nonsense. It's impossible," Biata returned.

"Nothing could be easier. Want to try?"

"Very much!"

"I brought my harness and water-skies along. Tavi and Proteus will be glad to give you a ride."

"No, thanks. I'd simply like to get up and slowly walk along it as if it were sand; and without any help from your gear."

"That makes it a bit more complicated, but if we give it some hard thinking...."

"Kostya," said Vera. "You've been in trouble before over your unethical conduct with sea primates. If Nilssen or Pavel Mefodevich finds out about your harness...."

"How will they find out?" He was whistling as he threaded the fish fillets—shaded orange from the star—on bamboo shoots. "No, I'll do this myself. It's a tricky job," he told me when I offered to help.

He forced the slender sticks into the sand beside the fire, bending them over so they hung above the glowing coals.

"I keep feeling that long, long ago I used to sit like this beside a fire," remarked Biata.

"Genetic memory," announced Kostya with authority. "Our ancestors warmed themselves like that, and not so long ago, either. We should try to recollect more often, search the dusty corners of our memory, and a lot more would come back to us. I've, for example, was a witness of my marksmanship when I was shooting darts into whale sharks. Never missed once, though I was standing on the foredeck of the boat as it rocked across the waves. And all because my ancestors were hunters."

Biata listened, lost in her own thoughts.

When Kostya finished, he looked at her expectantly.

"Didn't the dolphins ask anything about the star?" she asked, nodding at Tavi and Proteus.

"It's a bit strange. But they act as if they've seen something like it before. The sea primates are an older race than we are on Earth. They know the stars well, take their bearings by the stars. Just a moment, I'll ask."

"Like everything else, living stars are born

and die," Tavi answered Kostya's question. "There are living stars and dead stars. A star that is the colour of poisonous seaweed is a dead star." Kostya translated it.

Biata, who was sitting on the sand, suddenly jumped up.

"That's exactly right, incredibly true," and stopped short, frowning. "Kostya! How can you joke like that?"

Kostya made a gesture of protest.

"Ive! Tell her," he pleaded.

I vouched for my friend's translation.

Thinking silently, Biata raked the coals under the sticks. Vera was slowly turning the fish, looking as if she had done nothing else all her life.

"I like this kind of life. Very much," she said. "Let's try the fish and see if it's done." Burning her fingers, she broke off a piece of sizzling fish and put it in her mouth.

We all watched her closely. I noticed Kostya automatically imitating all her movements, and caught myself licking my parched lips. I could actually feel the taste of grilled fish in my mouth.

Vera made a wry face.

"We forgot to salt it!" she cried, tragically. "Where's the salt?"

Even Biata became absorbed in playing the game of primitive man, and went off to scout around among the palm trees.

Meanwhile the star kept rising higher over the ocean. Drops of fat sizzled and turned to smoke as they fell on the hot coals.

"That star is getting on my nerves," said Vera, playing with the sand.

I started explaining the reason for Vera's antipathy against the Supernova and I guess I sounded boring; all the time I was listening to the thundering surf which drowned out Biata's footsteps. Kostya got fed up with my pompousness.

"Better throw on some more wood," he said. "There's a whole pile of it right beside you."

"Naturally," said Vera, "all you say is quite logical, but that isn't the only reason why I dislike it. You see, stars should bring happiness!"

Biata returned.

"Here!" she called. Coconuts rolled towards the fire. "In the afternoon, Vera said these were unusual nuts." She sat by the fire. "The star won't shine long. But all the same, it's an astounding...."

"What's astounding about it?" asked Kostya. "It's simply an insolent orb of the high sky. Shouldn't pay any attention. You'd think it was the only star in the sky! Tavi said just the right thing about it. Didn't you agree with him?"

We all unconsciously looked up. There wasn't another star in the sky: all were covered by an orange film. Only the orange Supernova shone.

"Can you tie that!" Kostya ejaculated, and hurriedly pulled from the sand the sticks loaded with roasted tuna.

"It really is astounding," repeated Biata quietly, not noticing Kostya's outstretched hand. "The star's been dead a long time, stopped being an ordinary star thousands of years ago. And burnt up in a moment of time. Leaving only a lump of matter. "A Black Hole" or "Black Death". Also a star. Not very big. Five or six

kilometres in diameter, but its mass is so tightly condensed, so monstrously great and has such incredible gravity, that not one ray of light can come from this poor dwarf."

"A cinder that's a trap for astronauts," put in Kostya.

"Right. Everything that falls into its gravity sphere cannot pull out again, no matter what means are used, even...."

"Even a ray of light..." began Kostya, and shut up when Biata looked at him.

"I'm beginning to repeat myself. You know it all, anyway," Biata concluded.

"What lofty poetry," said Vera. "To shine on after having vanished, died. Soon its orange light will have passed us by and it will go on flying for thousands of years until it fades into space. But people of other worlds will wait a long time for its appearance, just as we did...."

"You're spoiling my appetite," broke out Kostya, angrily. "Enough about the star! Long live roasted tuna fish!" Biata put a finger to her lips.

"Sh-sh! Look!"

An orange crab came scrambling up to the fire. Behind him came another. They stopped about a metre from the fire, their stalk-eyes reflecting the flames.

Kostya picked up a palm leaf to shoot them away, but Biata and Vera asked him to leave them be. The crabs, they said, added a sort of exotic colouring to our feast. So the crabs sat there, eyes bulging, while we ate.

"I always felt friendly towards crabs," said Kostya, cutting off the coconut tops with his vibration knife.

Biata and Vera went into the water to feed Tavi and Proteus. Tavi whistled shrilly, which was his way of showing extreme delight.

"Delicious!" he said. "It doesn't taste a bit like tuna. More like deep-sea shell-fish, only better!"

Proteus noted that it wasn't quite so juicy but quite edible, and asked for a second helping.

"I never tasted anything like it," said Vera, her hands dirty with grease and soot. "Our standard table-service has lost its primitive glory. And the coconut milk—it's something out of this world. Let's gather all the coconuts we can find, and plant them on the island. And I'll take some back with me. I'm sure it'll make Mokimoto forgive me for all my dumb mistakes."

Proteus said that all women on the shoals and in the sea desired the unusual. From his viewpoint, only a woman would think of eating tuna fish after it had stood for a while by the little sun.

"How sweet he is!" said Biata.

"Very gallant," added Vera.

"I agree with my friend, Proteus," said Kostya, raising his coconut-cup. "It's too bad that neither he nor Tavi are able to raise the cup and join us in drinking to all women in the universe, no matter whether they spend most of the time walking on dry land or swimming in the seas and oceans. We'll drink to their gift of loving everything unusual! Though, the last is not in my favour."

We drank the cool tangy coconut milk from the improvised shell cups.

"With your gifts, I wouldn't have made such a public statement," Vera told Kostya.

"What gifts?"

"You've so many!"

"Name one!"

"Well, say the gift of cooking. Not one robot, stacked with the most sophisticated programming, could compare with you. If its calculation block should produce anything like one of your ideas, all its resistors and condensers would be short circuited trying to handle what was beyond its power."

"Is that all?"

"Nature has never so recklessly awarded such a great number of gifts to anybody alive under the sun or all the stars, including the Supernova. Using upper and lower extremities alone, you can climb the highest palm trees, you eat raw snails, jump on your head, sing lullabies in the language of sea primates. You even know whale language, and now you're downing your second coconut drink," said Vera.

"Is that all?"

"Did you notice," asked Vera, "how much he manages to express in only three little words, and especially by staying silent?"

"It's a sign of immeasurable ambition," said Biata. "During the precommunist world formation, dictators ripened out of such supermen!"

"What an all-embracing word—ripened!" Vera raised her finger in a theatrical gesture. "Look! This process is taking place right before our eyes. He made Tavi and Proteus catch the fish, made us cut up palm-tree logs with a Stone Age tool, even the salt supply was laid on Ivan's

shoulders. And me, he kindly permitted to turn the fish fillets on the sticks over the fire. Then, with the aid of half-raw, half-burned fish in our stomachs, he works a spell on our minds so that we show him signs of respect and vassal obedience."

"A typical tyrant of the unsettled world era," said Biata.

Kostya grinned, his face shiny with grease from the fish.

"Now I really get the meaning of one of our Old Man's aphorisms! He says that not one good deed is ever left unpunished. Anyway, I'll continue to show my generosity, and declare the dance open! Dancing always goes with feasting!"

Vera sang, clapping out the rhythm, and we all joined in to improvise a strange new song.

"Why, I even forgot about the star!" cried Biata. "The longer I live, the more I realize that no other place is as beautiful, or as rich in life, as ours is."

Vera hugged her.

"Your 'ours' sounds as if you were talking about your cottage in the suburbs of Moscow. Probably, to have great love for Earth, you have to leave it for a while."

"How right you are! Before I went to the satellite, I never thought about Earth. Just as you never think about food, water or air. But when I saw it covered with clouds and so lonely, so very tiny, then I felt a maternal pity for Earth."

Then the girls went for a walk along the orange sand, and we were a long time pitching

the tent. We could hear their voices and laughter, even through the pounding of the surf.

"It's safe enough. It won't take off," said Kostya.

I tested the pegs and fastenings several times. "No, it won't take off."

For five minutes, or an hour—without the girls, the minutes dragged out endlessly—we interchanged a few meaningless remarks.

Still they didn't come back.

"Getting late," said Kostya, and went down to the water.

We swam out to the jet-boat.

The tent lit up like the gigantic flower they call Selena's Torch. These cactuses are planted in Mexico along the edge of the roads: the flowers open only at night and close with the first faint gleam of dawn.

On the tiny videoscreen flashed the late night newscast covering events of the past twenty-four hours.

Dr. Wood published first data on links between electromagnetism, "subatomic" particles and gravitation, based on observations carried out during the Supernova radiation.

Freight ship returned from moon.

New mine was discovered in Antarctic.

Kostya was talking with the dolphins by hydrophone. Khokh and Ben had joined us. Not far from the island, they had noticed Black Jack and a few K-whales chasing cuttle-fish.

Kostya turned on the bearing-finder and on its tiny screen immediately flashed impulses from the microtransmitter attached to Jack's fin.

"It works!" cried Kostya. "Oh, I'd like to

meet him again. You know, the Old Man called him a Comanche Chief."

"Suits him to a T."

"And how!"

Vera and Biata came out of the tent. As alike as twins. Their voices just reached us.

"What a cool, lovely sand!"

"Extraordinary!"

"And the wind."

"Everything's been extraordinary today."

"What's that?"

"Just the surf."

"How can anybody sleep on a night like this?"

"Be quiet, or we'll wake them."

"If they can sleep in such a roar...."

"All the same, be quiet."

"You've got a lot to learn about men."

"Never mind, let's go down to the ocean."

For some reason, they didn't leave. The surf drowned their voices, and they stood facing us like black statues against the shining background of the tent.

And we looked at them, and a strange sensation enveloped us. Black Jack, the Orange Star, everything happening in the world... seemed to drift far away. Everything was forgotten, had vanished completely leaving only the two girls on the orange sand. The centre of the universe was now there, with all the mysterious forces; that kindle stars, blaze the trails to the galaxies, give birth to life and grant death.

The *Eternal Wind* is a science-fiction story about people of the not-too-distant future. The setting is an island float in the Indian Ocean, a biostation and a scientific centre for the biological research of ocean life. The main characters are students spending the summer on field practice. They unriddle the secrets of the ocean and help in utilizing its countless riches. The book also tells of the dolphin, man's closest friend, of killer whales and many strange denizens of the deeps. The book is full of thrills for the young reader—romance, adventure and danger accompanies the two student-heroes of this tale of the sea.
